Child Welfare IT Managers' Webinar Series: Back to Basics
"Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them"
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Coordinator: Thank you for standing by and welcome to today's conference. At this time all participants are in a listen-only mode. After the presentation we will conduct a question and answer session. To ask your question you may press star one on your touch-tone phone. Today's conference call is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect. I will now introduce your conference host, Miss Joyce Rose. Ma'am, you may begin.

Joyce Rose: Thank you and welcome to Webinar four of the "Back To Basics" series brought to you on behalf of the Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau and as presented by ICF International. I am Joyce Rose, your host and moderator for today's Webinar and joining me in a few minutes for a panel discussion on several of the most common pitfalls or issues that large IT initiatives like a CWIS may face over the project lifecycle will be a distinguished panel of state participants.

Changes in funding availability and priority mean that opportunities for impersonal discussions and networking among professionals working on state child welfare IT systems will be limited this year and likely in future years. Through this Webinar series with division of state systems within the Children's Bureau is offering a venue for information sharing and discussion. We are offering six Webinars, one per month between April and September 2013. The Webinars are intended not just for child welfare IT systems managers, but also all the staff involved in getting and keeping child welfare IT systems up and running.

Although our series theme was "Back to Basics", we invite and encourage participation from both experienced and newer managers and staff recognizing that even the most experienced among us have something new to learn or may need a simple refresher. All the Webinars are recorded and are available on-line as reference for informational resources for you and your staff. There is a URL that is listed on this slide and the Webinars can be found at that site. A global notification will be distributed once they are all posted and accessible.

So let's look at our "Back to Basics" series and as I mentioned previously, today is the fourth Webinar in the "Back to Basics" series as a panel discussion on several of the most common pitfalls and how to avoid them over a project lifecycle. The topics for the next two Webinars are still under discussion in the "Back to Basics" series, but please watch for information announcing what the August and September topics will be.

So how do we participate in today's Webinar? We encourage all attendees to participate in our Webinar with questions and comments. All our participant lines are muted now, but we will open them at the end of the presentation for discussion. You can also submit questions through the Go To Webinar chat feature. We will also save those until after the presentation has concluded. Should we run out of time we will respond to your questions via email and/or should you have additional questions you could actually submit those to me at the email address listed on this slide, joyce@kassets.com.

We are very interested in knowing who is attending this Webinar in terms of position or capacity. It is our attempt throughout all of the "Back to Basics" Webinars to make the content applicable and attractive for all disciplines participating in a state SACWIS or CWIS effort. We ask that you self select one of the five categories listed also recognizing that not all states are SACWIS states and to be inclusive of everyone we will use the more generic Child Welfare Information System (CWIS).

Elizabeth, will you please conduct the poll.

Elizabeth Mertinko: Sure. I have just opened the poll up so if you could go ahead and cast your vote and tell us who you are that we have attending and I will just let it run another couple of seconds since people are still casting votes and with 89% of our audience responding - excuse me 94% responding. We have 24% that are state Child Welfare Information System project managers, another 24% that are program managers, 18% who are technical managers, 24% project staff and 12% ACF Children's Bureau personnel.

Joyce Rose: Thank you and this is a wonderfully representative group that is attending today and it seems to be consistent throughout the first three Webinars and now into the fourth so thank you again. So let us close the poll and let's take a quick look at today's agenda. The format is we will do a brief introduction of our state panel participants followed by about an hour or so of discussion on the common project lifestyle pitfalls and then we will invite all attendees to participate in a Q&A session ending up with a brief wrap-up.

So let's do our introductions. Actually our guest participants probably need no real introduction but let me extend a warm welcome to them. We have Brady Birdsong, Chief Information Officer for the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency and as such he oversees the District's SACWIS and he recently celebrated 12 years on the DC SACWIS project. Linnette Carlson has been a licensed social worker for 40 years and has 29 years of experience in state child welfare and she has worked on the New Mexico SACWIS system from implementation in 1997 to present.

Tresa Young has been the Bureau Chief Automated Systems for the Office of Families and Children in the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services since 2008 and she has more than 25 years of child welfare experience with degrees and certification in social work, project management and business contract management.

Kevin has a master's degree in business administration and more than 13 years of child welfare experience at the state and local level. He served as the Metro Agency Implementation Lead for Ohio SACWIS rollout and currently provides management oversight for the state policy and SACWIS helpdesk.

Joe Vastola is the Director of the Florida Department of Children and Families Enterprise Management Project Office. He joined DCF in 2005 and prior to his current assignment served as the DCF Director of Application Development and as the project director for implementation in the state SACWIS the Florida Safe Families Network.

We are extremely pleased to have these qualified individuals as our guest participants and myself, formerly a project director for the State of Wisconsin SACWIS project retiring from state service in 2004 and since that time I have been involved with several administrative for children and family - children sponsored training events.

So let's get right to the heart of this webinar and let's start out with what we have identified as common pitfall number one and probably to no one's surprise that is poorly defined requirements. Certainly, child welfare end users are non-IT specialists and as such may not understand the IT requirements gathering process nor the impact of not getting them right. Brady, I am going to ask you to start us please and probably prospect management requirement gathering process to be sure you were building a system to meet the user's needs.

Brady Birdsong: Thank you, Joyce. Before we get into that, maybe at some point somebody can describe to me or to explain to me how Linnette has been licensed for 40 years when she is only 29. I don't understand.

Linnette Carlson: You are good Brady. You are good.

Brady Birdsong: Right? I am confused, but...

Linnette Carlson: There you go.

Brady Birdsong: You know, Joyce, when I said that I would respond to this question and thought about how the - did the district do anything special or how did we really respond to the gathering requirements. Like you said, I don't think this is a new issue for anybody. Nobody is going to be surprised when they hear statistics about why do projects, software projects, fail and because we have poorly defined requirements. You know, I mean, my thought was what do I have to add to this conversation and I think the district has done a pretty good job of it. We really haven't had any projects that failed miserably or even really failed that much, but I just felt like I needed some inspiration on how to frame the discussion for this call so I did what I normally do when I am looking for inspiration is I Google it and so I Googled requirements gathering and saw the same old - until I came across an article that was in Stevie's blog rant and the title of the blog was "Business Requirements are BS" and, of course, that caught my attention and I read that and it was pretty interesting. It was an intriguing article but the main point came down to and it was really geared towards entrepreneurism, people who were starting from scratch on building, it was build what you know and I thought that was a really important aspect to this and thought well, you know, as IT folks in child welfare we are usually building things or almost - probably always building things that are what the practice people want of course, but I do think it is applicable for a number of reasons and one is, as you pointed out, that the workers aren't - they are not IT specialists and, of course, our IT specialists are not social workers, but it is critical especially from our IT perspective that we really, really understand the business that is going on and have a deep understanding of what this - what this thing accomplished in the practice so that we can automate or we can find a technical solution for that. And, I think too often what it comes down to is that maybe that the practice is developed in a bubble or it is developed apart from having the IT folks at the table and then they don't - but then they are coming to the IT folks and saying, "Here, implement this." And I think that what the district has done very well is - especially the last few years is always have - is understanding the importance of having an IT representative at the table when projects are getting developed and part of that - I mean, programs are getting developed. And part of that was because of how we sort of insisted upon it early on. It was, you know, we want to be at the table but not to drive the practice and I think one of the things that we also do very well is - I am sure everybody has had this experience when there is an idea of how we change practice or something that is needed and they turn to the SACWIS folks and say, “Is that possible? How would you do that? We need a check box for this?” And, you know, our response is - and folks will even repeat it now before we get a chance to say it - is that they have - don’t think about FACES yet. Think about what the practice is actually going to look like and how do they want to practice that in the real world and so I think that is really important and I tell you one of the other things that we - I have observed and seen in a couple of recent projects and as we continue to grow in our capabilities here is we cannot just be observers or recorders of information when we are trying to gather requirements. We really need to be active participants in it and again it is not the change of the practice, but to ask and really clarify questions and as I was writing down a number of different responses to this question I sort of thought in some ways we become a good therapist or the social workers and others working on these projects because we are observing and you have to make - you have to call out observations. And a couple of things that we have realized is that we are - when you hear different things from different parts of the agency and sometimes you hear the social workers say - it is almost a resignation of well that is the division that the leadership has and so we will just work with you to help design something but it is not something we are really going to practice, but we really don’t have an option in it or a choice. And on a number of different occasions - here what I have done is facilitated meetings between the leaders and the staff and not to even stir up contention but to say hey, what we are observing here and what we are hearing is a disconnect between the vision of this project and how the workers actually see it being practiced and that actually comes to - it has really works very well to get people on the same page and to have a set of objectives moving forward that are agreed upon by everybody.

So, you know, I think a lot of times that in the end really that the proper requirements gathering is less about having some magic bullet or some standard. It is a lot of just to me really, really asking questions and going back and a lot a lot of clarification because I am a big fan, a big proponent, of you have got to spend the time upfront to get it right before you actually really start getting in and doing the work - the development, but you have to also know when it is time. Right? It is okay with decisions going back through a process to make sure that we have got these requirements but at some point it is go time and then you start working on the actual development. So, I would say that is what we have put in to practice here.

Joyce Rose: Yes. Brady, I totally agree with everything that you have said and I would now ask members of our panel if, you know, what has happened in your state to make sure that you get the requirements correct? Anybody want to jump in here?

Linnette Carlson: This is Linnette from New Mexico and I kind of come from a different perspective because I come from a program area with a little bit of IT business analyst experience. What we did in New Mexico was we centralized the requirement and development and writing process within a unit that was developed at the beginning of the CWIS project back in 1997 and these six folks really are what we call translators. They speak both IT and child welfare. They are not developers but they have the concept. We have some that are social workers or have worked in the field and others from different perspectives and so in their working with upper management and all levels down to the field level being able to ask a lot of those questions and trying to get clarity of exactly what is being asked, but also being aware of potential pitfalls where somebody wants something but they haven’t looked at possible unintended consequences regarding conflicting with federal regulations, state law, you know, policies and procedures, Title IV. So it has been one of those

- so they gained a lot of experience and had a lot of historical knowledge and skill in drawing that information out. I think the challenge is getting our upper management or program requestors to be on the same timeline as IT development process. If you kind of think about a pregnancy - from birth to delivery date and I think sometimes our program folks or the originators of the idea, all they are focusing on is the delivery date. They are not looking at what needs to be determined early, early in the process and kind of have had an idea of we'll determine that later not understanding the impact that has on how something is developed, how much involvement and resources are needed in order to accomplish what they need.

The other thing I think is really is excellent is requirements document that kind of stimulate that thought where people may not have thought of things or things like the background processing, you know, automated messages, triggers, all that kind of stuff as well as data issues, data conversion and data cleanup issues.

Joyce Rose: Those are absolutely excellent points. I like the term translators. I think that - I suspect that a lot of states have that particular skill set to facilitate between the IT and the program folks so that communication is obviously is extremely important to getting things right and to giving things that not actually meet what the end user wants and so thank you so very much.

So let us move on to the second pitfall and it is very closely related to the poorly defined requirements and that is all about scope creep and Brady, I am going to ask you to be our first responder once again and what was your state and its approach to realistically managing and controlling scope creep in order to stay on budget, on time and obviously with quality. Brady.

Brady Birdsong: Well, I do think it is very closely related to the issue of requirements and having accurate requirements. I was thinking, you know, what did we do to realistically manage and control scope creep and I am not sure that we did. Not that it ever really got to be a problem, but I am thinking of - it is almost again sometimes it is really hard to control it because I think going back to the requirements too, it is all about communication. Right? It is all about the IT staff really having as much of an understanding and having somebody be able to translate the program goals to the IT staff and I think that probably most of the SACWIS folks have tried to do that and have folks on staff who can do that. I think the other thing is what I have tried to do here too is be very - is as much as possible turn my - the folks that I work with - my colleagues on the program side to turn them into as much experts of IT as they can be to really try and give them a sense of what it takes and what it means to do the development of a project of an enhancement to the system. One, so they understand what they need to give us a little more to get a really successful product and I think it is always about, hey, we want this to be successful because we understand the impact that this is going to have on the services that we provide children and their families and that this is all about outcomes for the people that we are serving.

I think that one of the things that we have started doing is at the beginning or clear the beginning of any project is to define the objectives, the guiding principles of a project, and, you know, that helps to sort of - and some of it is even explicit of, you know, this is phase one and we can only do up to a certain point and therefore you have to make a decision if you want it A or B. You can’t have both A and B, but you can have one or the other and as long as that does not really impact the outcomes. So I think one is really having an agreement upfront that this what we are trying to accomplish with as much understanding on both sides of what it means to develop software and then what - for the software developers for us to understand what the program is trying to achieve, but I think again it is that the work has to be done - a lot of the work has to be done upfront and again if the effort you spend upfront really pays off down the road of making sure everything is going smoothly and I think it is about an iterative conversation of always going back and clarifying and asking again what do you want and having - just really, really asking as open-ended but also directed and specific questions of the program staff and allowing them to ask the same questions of us, but I think it is also just not making assumptions that we understand what it is supposed to be - what they are trying to accomplish. So, it seems pretty basic and I guess it is and maybe it is back to the basics because it is all about communication and then having folks agree to yes that is what we are trying to accomplish and understanding the requirements to understand the scope.

Joyce Rose: Yes. Thank you, Brady. You know, I think if we start out under the notion that things are going to be a little bit bigger when we are done than when we started, I think there is a certain amount of scope creep that is going to just be realistic. But the whole idea is just you need to stay obviously on budget and time is an issue. So, Linnette, do you have anything to add?

Linnette Carlson: I was going to add onto that Joyce if I could real quick because again this interesting article that I read about business requirements are BS - though again it may not be totally applicable to our deal - what we are working in, but one of the things that this gentleman said is about trimming the requirements which I thought was very interesting. Is that things can get bigger and bigger but are we really adding things that are important to the project overall and what we are trying to accomplish from a practice perspective or is it just, oh yeah, that would be nice to have or that would be nice to have, but is it really - are those additions core to what we are trying to achieve and I think a lot of times it is not. But when we don’t have those clear guiding principles or directives of what the project is trying - it is easier to just keep adding and adding and adding. But if we say is that really a value add to this project given these guiding principles or do we need to add it. And that also I think can obviously keep the scope in a manageable - in the same size as what we started with.

Joyce Rose: Very good. Very good. Panelists, do you have anything you would like to add in support of Brady?

Joe Vastola: Hi Joyce. This is Joe. Just two quick things for our participants to consider that we did: One is that I always used to joke with my staff and say, you know, as the state we wanted everything from the vendor for free and the vendor wanted to deliver as little as possible and charge us and while that is certainly a joke I think what we found that for all these initiatives that are tied to vendor delivery, vendors usually show up with wonderful scope management processes that while you never want to adopt them blindly, you can certainly leverage and leverage the attention of your vendor to help control it. I think if you strike a balance between how they want to manage it and the fact that you have to manage it you can find that you can leverage those processes pretty effectively.

Secondly, I think, you know, the way we worked hard to control it was you really have to have scope creep off at the ankles right where it starts. So the biggest issue with scope creep isn't always the fact that you are delivering too much or agree to do too much. Sometimes it is that you spend too many cycles talking about delivering things that you don't need and so the sooner you can push the identification of an out of scope issue upfront before resources and dollars are spent on it the better off you are .

Joyce Rose: Absolutely. Good point, Joe. Good point. Anyone else want to add anything or should we move onto number three. It looks like we will move onto number three or sounds like we will move onto number three which is poor testing. And oftentimes developers will do a great deal of testing but eventually it comes down to the end users who must run the acceptance test to see if the system is meeting their business requirements. So, Linnette, what was your state's approach to system acceptance testing and how did you select your testers and what kind of training did you provide? Do you think your approach was successful?

Linnette Carlson: Sure, I can talk about that. What I can say are approaches - as many of you know, in New Mexico we are kind of an antique. We are, our system, our SACWIS system came up in 1997 and so we have learned and had successes and bruises along the way. Like Brady, I sat down and kind of thought about what concepts might really be important to share and one of them that came to me was testing is only as good as the complete testing process and that means all the way back to the unit testing by the developer, the quality assurance testing by the IT business analyst, the user acceptance by the program area and then the regression testing on the whole application by the IT business analyst etc. And the reason I bring that up is if there are deficits in those first two levels before it comes to user acceptance testing, it is going to be frustrating for everybody involved. Our concept of testing at all levels needing to be strong, comprehensive, extensive with as much institutional knowledge as possible. You know, testing the majority of the scenarios with an eye to unintended consequences and different styles of testing. We found in the early days development was not used much tabbing and it was more of a mouse approach. As we have new users coming on they are used to tabbing. They don't want to have that impatient thing about moving the mouse around and so we really had to change our ways of testing and coding in order to deal with that. Trying unconventional ways I know it was a surprise to everybody but not all social workers are program people who enter things the same way and so trying to find different ways to do - utilize that and definitely in UA testing trying to break it - seeing what somebody might do that was not an A through Z step-by-step processing.

The other thing we really learned and this may be a shock to people is that social workers and program people don't think like IT people. I have had many conversations with great developers who came very excited that we found this really great way - we found this great functionality and this is how we are going to do it and it would be like speaking French to someone, you know, from the United States. The social workers don't think that way. They don't practice that way. It does not follow their workflow and so really making sure the user acceptance testing is one, did we get the concepts that management wanted and was it interpreted well by the developer and IT and is coming back in a format that is useable to meet whatever needs the user has.

I think the important thing about user acceptance testing is that the users who are testing know what was requested. No what was rather than coming in and being surprised and thinking this isn't what I thought I wanted. The other one was that really fine line that has to be done in that it - user acceptance testing is not a time to throw in everything and the kitchen sink. Oh gee, I thought about this now but the challenge is that there is always going to be things that come up that were not anticipated by IT or programmed and so you have to have a flexibility or as you said, Joyce, you got to know it is going to be bigger than you might have thought but not letting it going rampant. So being able to respond to that - those critical issues for practice and etc but yet not get lost. I just really feel that requirements and the UA testing are so tightly intertwined. You know, if you've got good requirements at the beginning there is that understanding really user acceptance testing is confirming that this looks like what we asked. In New Mexico we have been evolving and we have begun using focused groups to work with to identify complete needs and challenges, considering the change requests and modifications and soliciting input from all levels from the field and that is how we are basically managing our expectations. And then in the development process going back to those focus groups and saying, “Hey, this is what the window is looking like.” This is what we are thinking it is going to look like and getting their feedback to keep us on track. Are we on the right track? Are there things we haven’t considered? Now that you have seen this is there something else? So this is much earlier in the process than, oh my gosh, at user acceptance testing. We are in trouble. We missed the mark.

The other thing that we have utilized is using specific field users that come in and assist with acceptance testing. We haven’t done wide groups like many states and having lots of field people coming in. One is time requirements and some of it is the expertise in testing, but we have utilized things like our state centralized intake or centralized adoption unit or eligibility people if we are making changes in their program bringing them in not only to focus group side but also on the testing side to make sure that we are interpreting their process and their practice and that new functionality is going to do what we would like it to.

The other thing is in New Mexico the lion’s share of the user accepting testing for the last 16 years has fallen on these decentralized fact specialists that I kind of spoke to you about earlier, the translators. And however with increasing complexities and new and modified federal, state and local requirements, mandates and laws, this has really become daunting. It has become very extensive labor and time drain and so we have had to really do some dividing and conquering and downsize. It used to be my team could test everything that was in a release. Now we have to kind of divide and conquer and kind of tie into more specialties or crossing, but not everybody can pass everything and so one of the things that we have talked about in the past was using some type of automated testing program or sequel type of thing. We have not used that historically but we are talking about that in our web-based conversion that we are looking at and I think that will be really helpful for testers who can test some of the more practical things rather than the rote processes that are kind of typical and can be very time considering.

The other thing was that New Mexico is doing that we are really excited about is we are committed and moving towards a fellows program that was modeled after New Jersey's program in which every county has a fellow in their county. They are brought in for specialized training not just about facts or child welfare information system but also about using data and how to interpret it, how to use it, etc. and this actually like an honor. They actually apply for it and get approved and kind of go through an academy and get their training. And so what we would see is not only would those folks be excellent in helping to assist the field, also be involved in the requirements but also go to the actual people in bringing in the testing. So it expands our repertoire of people we are testing but also increasing the job knowledge and expertise. The challenge that New Mexico has is one shifting from the client server to the web which we are all excited about. This is going to take a lot of work. And two in our facts unit which is a total of six staff, all but two will retire including myself within less than probably two years and so that institutional knowledge is something we are working on to look at and see how we can shore that up and the fellows program is one of those that has done it.

Our user acceptance testing has been very successful. We are the ones that everybody knows that we will find if there is something wrong, you know. Obviously one of the things you have to look at in testing is that scenarios are 98% that we are looking at. You cannot code and program for 100% of all the exceptions and so we are looking at in user acceptance kind of finding those exceptions and figuring out other strategies to address those because you don't have enough time or money to address 100%, but we have been very, very successful but it has been sometimes blood, sweat and tears but it has been the institutional knowledge and the skill.

Joyce Rose: Excellent. If anyone of our attendees - if any of our attendees are interested in learning more about your fellows program, Linnette, would you be willing - okay you can share that so. If you want to identify yourselves via chat or whatever, we will get you connected to Linnette. And my question that I have for the panelists about testing is, does any state that is represented, Florida, Ohio, DC, do any of you use an automated test tool?

Brady Birdsong: This is the District. This is Brady. We don't.

Joyce Rose: Okay. Kevin? Ohio? Do you use automated test tools?

Kevin Bullock: Yes. Yes, we do. We used a Quick Test Pro.

Joyce Rose: What was that again?

Kevin Bullock: Quick Test Pro. It is a Hewlett Packer product. Part of the application lifecycle management packet.

Joyce Rose: Okay. Did you find it extremely difficult to get started?

Kevin Bullock: It does take some leg work to get started. It is actually handled outside of our area with our information systems office and they have gone in and recorded the steps for each page in the application, you know, recorded the steps. If we make a change to the application we actually have to go in and edit their script so it reflects the new functionality, but they are able to run those on a regular basis for regression testing.

Joyce Rose: Fantastic. Again, that was Kevin from Ohio so if anybody wants more information about the tool that they are using, I am sure we can get you connected to Kevin.

Let's move on now to our fourth pitfall we have identified and that is under allocated resource when often there are simply too few state resources allocated to a large CWIS project, multitasking, long hours and constant juggling of priorities becomes a way of project life. That can lead to some morale issues, productivity decline and even some deception. So, Joe Vastola from Florida, can you tell us how you engaged your staff and prevented morale issues and got enough resources to get your project done?

Joe Vastola: I think as I have thought about this topic I think we are no doubt like many other states where you have got so much going on often times when you complete something successfully you are already behind on the next thing and so there is never any time to celebrate success. And so as I have thought about our project here and the work we've done with our child welfare system, I can report that it's very hard for us to just take the time and reflect.

We have done a couple things though that I think have helped with moral. And I've been surprised at, quite frankly, how some of these approaches have worked.

I mean like all states, the people we work with, whether they're in IT or whether they're program resources or partner resources to a person. We find them to be very committed to, you know, the child welfare environment and moving it forward and increasing the quality and timeliness of it.

And so what I've really found is that the more that you can do to show that each person who is involved, right, because they're all assigned multiple tasks and multiple projects. But that their involvement has impact on the project and the activities you're doing.

And we've done that through communication as an example. Making sure that people that know what they're working on, why they're working on it, how it fits in the scheme of things. Just to give them a sense of where they fit in with the project and how they're making an impact.

Other mechanisms we've used have been along the lines of making sure that we minimize to the extent we can the amount of wasted time or duplicate work or number of times people have to communicate or involve themselves in activities. So that they feel like their time is being utilized appropriately.

Many of these things turn out to be just what I like to call and what, no doubt, everybody would realize is just effective management. Utilizing the resource at your disposal and making sure that the right people are empowered to do the right things.

And so those are the types of activities that we've kind of employed here. We consistently sit back after success and say gee, we should have celebrated that. Let's do it the next time.

And we found it very hard to just institute those kinds of activities and attention. We do - we have put in place processes at the management level where in every management meeting the last topic of every meeting is a question by our CIO or the executive. And the - running a meeting as to whether they need to thank anybody for work that's been done within that time period.

And so letting people see that their questions, their issues, their results are getting visibility throughout the organization is certainly a wonderful moral booster.

And so I guess in general what I would say is, you know, where we all in Florida work hard to learn about how to celebrate success. And how to take the time to focus on the things that are important before we get bogged down in the next task. Particularly when you're implementing a child welfare system and there's one deliverable after the next and one design meeting and requirements meeting that follows.

But taking the time to make sure that your staff know where they're involved, why their involved, that the communication is flowing. That issues that they're gyrating around are getting responded to. And if they're not that they understand the status of those things.

Just basically, you know, rightly involve them in these projects and the activities so that they can see that one, they're getting - they're achieving the impact and, you know, level of involvement that satisfies and meets the level of commitment that they, you know, that they enjoy and support the reasons why the work in this environment.

And that two, you really look to maximize their time. Where you've got people who know elements of the system, you delegate the active - delegate decisions to them. Everybody - morale is always affected when people are able to not only contribute, but affect the outcome.

So I think, you know, while we, like I said, continue to work to figure out how to take the time because there's so much we're getting done and so much we're behind on while we're getting things done. We found historically that people are - moral is higher when people realize that they're contributing.

They're maximized - we're maximizing the level of involvement and time that they're applying to our tasks.

Joyce Rose: Absolutely, do you want to add anything and what you may have done to keep your staff motivated and focused?

Tresa Young: Joyce this is Tresa from Ohio. I agree with the points that Joe made. And I also think it's just important to re-frame the accomplishments in terms that have meaning to kids and families or how it made a difference basically in terms of the bottom line of child welfare, the outcomes of child welfare.

Sometimes I think the day to day work is so difficult with the development and the testing and the workload that sometimes the developers particularly I would say probably might not understand the impact that their work has.

So I think just making sure that the messaging gets back to those folks who are doing that work. And quantifying for them, you know, your work resulted in this, you know, safer kids. And/or resulted in foster children being involved in a different way, or whatever the outcome is for that particular piece of work.

And making sure that they know how important that work is I think is just really important.

Joyce Rose: Excellent point. Thank you for adding that. So let us now move on to our fifth pitfall. And that is just the performance issues. And certainly again I'm going to ask Joe to jump in here.

But, you know, a system that is - has slow response time or bad stability, poor usability. That is going to contribute to whether or not the end users will accept it, embrace it and actually use the application.

So Joe, can you speak to us a bit on what Florida has done in terms of managing and monitoring performance?

Joe Vastola: Sure. We've got a baseline set of tools that allow both our staff and probably like most states we've got an agency that handles all of our hardware infrastructure.

So a separate data center that's part of the state that we provision services from. And they've got a set of tools. But unfortunately the tools are basically monitoring tools. And all they're going to do for us is tell us when a problem happens.

And so what we found is given the dynamics of our system, so we implemented the first version of our system back in 2007. And so it's a Web-based system.

And the dynamics that we've got for usage are not only are our state employees using the system, but also our outsourced providers. So what we found over time is regardless of the tools that we put in place, they really help us know when something is happening.

And often times what we're finding is that we hear first from our users whether there are problems before we hear from our data center that we've got performance issues.

And so the first thing I'll say is that it's probably been one of the most effective tools we've put in place is a first responder through our help desk system.

So we've got a statewide help desk that receives all calls from partner and state resources when there are issues. And so we found that we've been more effective at managing ongoing performance in a maintenance and operations environment by making sure that we've eliminated as much time as possible from when that person calls with a problem to our statewide help desk to when we're taking action trying to address the problem.

So, you know, one of those tools is, you know, looking at our processes for how you get to the point where you're at least triaging an issue. And reducing as much of the fluff and wasted time within that process to make it more efficient as possible.

Secondly, it took us a while to educate our users so that they knew that the most efficient way to report issues was through our help desk. So we avoided calls directly to staff who, you know, you call as staff. They may take your issue. But they may not be the person who can actually resolve it.

I think secondly too this idea of triaging an issues with the infrastructure that supports our child welfare system. And again the dynamics in our partners internal and external, our stakeholders.

You know, you get a call for a system problem. It could be our state network. It could be the provider network through which they're accessing the system. It could be resources in the mid range on the mainframe. It could be security or the load balancing environment.

And so again, efficiency in getting that understanding that you got a problem. The next step that we found most valuable is getting somebody who can triage and determine where the problem really is quickly because again, performance issues are only performance problems if they last. Because in the dynamic - given the dynamics of the systems that we have today, you're consistently dealing with performance challenges as you roll out new pieces.

Or you implement new components of the system. Or you're changing configurations. Or you're updating to meet a new required level of a particular software or operating system that supports in there.

So the idea of monitoring is important. And the tools that you've got there to know where you've got issues are important. But from a user perspective, what keeps users happy is system available and system running.

And so the more you can do to get that, an understanding of the fact that you have a problem. Get somebody on it. And then manage the assignment of the task to the right person. In our case that may be our staff, application staff and maybe network staff and maybe back to our data center.

And really work towards where you're assigning people who are responsible for the management and resolution of that problem instead of just passing the ticket along to somebody who may fix it.

And so we found that by kind of integrating our internal monitoring. So we're watching to see when the systems are there. And again we watch. We have transactions monitors that sit both in our mid range and mainframe environment.

So we know if either capacity or performance is being impacted. Sometimes we find that that doesn't matter because, you know, the mid range may slow down. But there aren't many users impacted because they're, you know, doing reporting or something. So it's not an operational impact.

And then reducing the inefficiencies that exist from when you identify a problem, to when it's assigned and what the issue is and making sure that the right person fixes it. And assigning someone the job of making sure it gets fixed.

And then I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about the requirements for communication. Sometimes when you've got users, you know, they don't know you're working on a problem if you don't acknowledge it. So that feedback look to say hey, we've heard you. We know there's a problem. There is a problem.

Making sure you're advising the stakeholders who use the system that you have a problem. So that they don't waste time or they don't re-communicate the same information.

Just that whole communication process has been the tools that have helped us to manage what is a very large system which, you know, like many of you has tens of thousands of users everyday.

Joyce Rose: That's an excellent response Joe. I appreciate it. And you set up our segue right into our sixth pitfall. And that's the lack of a high functioning user help desk.

And certainly a help desk is one of the main keys to creating end user satisfaction through excellent customer service. So I'm going to ask (Kevin) to respond here.

And I know when I introduce (Kevin), he is currently does the management oversight for both the Ohio State Policy help desk and the (sackless) help desk.

So I think your structure is going to be interesting to all of our attendees. So Kevin do you want to tell us about your help desks please?

Kevin Bullock: Thank you. In Ohio we have a county administered child welfare system. So we had the somewhat unique or extraordinary situation of supporting 88 local child welfare agencies in addition to some private agencies that we have that have access to the system as well.

That amounts to about - I think we're in the neighborhood of around 7,000 users. What we've done early on in implementation is create super users in each agency to provide the first level of support.

So part of - one of the main ways - or part of the reason for our success why we can support many users is that we do have experts in each agency that help child welfare issues on a local level.

And then provide a, sort of a liaison to the SACWIS help desk so that they can train, you know, relate issues to the help desk and then return information back to their own agency when they receive communication back from us.

On our help desk we currently have, for the SACWIS site we currently have five full-time business analysts assigned to the help desk. These business analysts are also responsible for testing and other project related assignments.

So they're not solely - or I mean their sole responsibility is not in - sorry, their sole responsibility is not just the help desk. But they do have project related responsibilities.

We also have the policy side for families and children. And on that side of the help desk where we have two individuals, they support the general public that may call in with questions about policy or maybe questions about child welfare in their county.

So that, you know, we can respond and relate information back to them on that side as well.

Our SACWIS business analysts are also responsible to note policy in Ohio so that if any of the calls from the policy help desk were to spill over. Since we only have two representatives on the policy help desk, we take the overflow and send it to the SACWIS help desk.

They're also required to provide support for those calls as well. So they don't get those as often. But they do have to have that knowledge in order to handle those calls.

Well on the help desk we have it situated where we have gatekeeper. As Joe mentioned, having someone there to triage the issues as they come in through inquiries and assign them a priority and get them assigned to the right person to resolve the issue.

We have one person that takes shift, you know, we had a half-day shift currently. And they'll take those inquires and they'll create tickets and assign them to the correct people that can address those issues.

We receive about 12,000 inquiries a year between email and phone calls. And those translate into about 7,000 tickets that we will document.

Some of those issues may be just end user support or walkthroughs or something like that that we can provide over the phone and take care of that immediately.

We have a standard of 24 hour response time that we require. But our staff well exceeded this measure. And often respond back to the sender within the hour.

We've also worked to create a number of self-help tools that the user can use without actually contacting the help desk. We've created a website which we entitled the Ohio SACWIS Knowledge Base.

On that knowledge base we have over 300 articles that detail functionality of our system, give walkthroughs, explanations and clarification for end users if they want to go out to that site to see if there's some type of documentation they can use prior to calling the help desk.

We do use the help desk software app - a software help desk application to manage our tickets. It's currently called Remedy. It's a little - it's slightly outdated. But it does allow us to document our tickets and retrieve those from a database when needed.

And make sure, you know, keeps us accountable. And make sure that we receive or, excuse me, obtain the resolution in a timely fashion. We're working to upgrade our system to ITSM case management.

This will not only convert our legacy ticket info into the new system. But it will include a lot more additional level of automation that we hope will streamline our work flows and allow things to more, you know, allow us to create tickets more easily from inquires.

And also document the information a lot faster than emails will flow directly into the system and be saved with the ticket information.

Woman: Kevin I have a question.

Kevin Bullock: Sure.

Woman: Do your end user base, do they have access to Remedy? Or how do they keep informed of where their problem ticket is?

Kevin Bullock: A lot of them will track on their own. And we do not have the ability - we don't have a public portal to Remedy for them to see that. We recognize that issue. We're hoping we can achieve that in the future with ITSM case management when we upgrade our system.

But we do run reports and send them out to each agency to allow them to see which tickets have been closed or resolved. In addition, when you resolve a ticket in Remedy, it will send a notification to you so that you know that your issue has been resolved and provide a resolution comment as well.

Woman: Great thank you.

Woman: Kevin, I have another question for you.

Kevin Bullock: Sure.

Woman: Are your SACWIS help desk staff and your program, you know, your policy help desk staff, are they co-located?

Kevin Bullock: They are. We - they are actually sitting right next to each other. So yes they are. And they do - they are able to share knowledge with one another being so close. So that is a benefit for us.

Woman: Great. And I'm sorry if I interrupted. Go ahead.

Kevin Bullock: No that was a great question. Thank you. Yes our help desk is seated physically right next to each other. We're within, you know, no one is farther than 20 feet away from, well maybe a little bit further. But everybody is in the same isle.

And we're also located within the same area as the entire project. So not only are they closely seated to each other, but closely seated to other business analysts that are providing support to each are of the application.

Woman: Fantastic, thank you.

Kevin Bullock: You're welcome. Our help desk is also staffed with all business analysts as well. So their experience and skills have, you know, they had to meet the same minimum qualifications as the other business analysts on the project that are assigned to other design activities and testing and things of that nature.

And as I mentioned earlier, their responsible for various testing assignments. So that helps them keep up on their knowledge with the application and new functionality since often times they've had to or been responsible for testing that piece of functionality when we put it into the application.

That will get them to provide user support if they have questions regarding the new functionality. And, you know, again keeps them up to date.

We've been moving toward - in a direction where we've been able to include those business analysts on the help desk in various initiatives. That helps them bring an end user perspective to our design sessions, as well as, as I stated earlier, keep them up to speed on changes to the application.

They can share that knowledge with their peers on the help desk. And that really translates into great user support.

Joyce Rose: Fantastic, and this - panelists do you have anything that you want to add in terms of your help desk approach in your state that, you know, may be a little bit different or anybody?

Linnette Carlson: This is Linnette from New Mexico. And I guess I had a couple of questions. One is our help desk is contained in the ITF division. There has been a transition. When we first started, the help desk did provide that general program as well as technical support.

That has - and it was staffed with people who had program background. But that has transitioned in more recent years to it is just a technical, you know, network printer, that kind of things.

All questions regarding protective services or our FR - our child welfare applications are directed to my staff, which are in a different division. And so that's obviously, you know, increased some work flow and those kinds of things. So it's been an interesting transition.

Also our help desk, which is quite small, I think there's like five positions now. It does support numerous divisions as they all are in our child welfare information system, protective services, early childhood, administrative services.

So they basically cover in excess of over 2,000, you know, employees. They do use a lifetime application, which is a COTS system. And it has some limitations and things that we are able to communicate back and forth and search and see where tickets are.

We had to make some general changes because you only can search on tickets that are open to you. And that wasn't real helpful to me as I was supervising because we are one of the primary persons who open tickets with them.

And so we ended up creating a, kind of a user that was a TSC back support that we all were members of so we all could go in and search to see if we had similar issues.

The one question I did have was do states have after hours support? We do not. Ours is pretty much an 8 to 5 support. So I was just interested in how other states are doing that, particularly like we have a 24-hour hotline and, you know, weekends, et cetera.

Joyce Rose: Kevin?

Kevin Bullock: Yes this is Kevin again from Ohio. In Ohio we have - we only staff our SACWIS help desk Monday through Friday, 8 to 5. But for system performance type issues, agencies are able to call our information services help desk.

And they would assist with any performance type of issues that might occur off hours. So they do have that level of support. However, for user support, they would want to contact our agency either via email - or I mean our help desk via email or through, you know, during 8 to 5 when they can get a hold of a business analyst.

Linnette Carlson: Right. I suspect that that is probably the way most states or organized with their help desks staffing 8 to 5 or whatever your business hours are.

Kevin Bullock: Yes that’s the way it is in the district too.

Joyce Rose: Yes, yes. Okay so let’s move on now to what we have identified as our last common pitfall. And that’s poor vendor relationships.

And certainly it’s not uncommon that when large IT projects (unintelligible) outsource significant vendor management problems can surface if not managed carefully, so Tresa we’re going to ask you to tell us about your experience in terms of vendor relationships.

Tresa Young: Thanks Joyce. Some of the topics that I was going to talk about sound obvious. And it was interesting to me that some of these strategies actually cross the different pitfall. And one that I heard a lot throughout the discussion today had to do with having realistic expectations.

And I think one of the things that is challenging for a vendor state relationship is for the state to have realistic expectations about what it is they want to purchase. And to really do their homework in terms of really defining the scope and their resource needs and their budget as much as they can ahead of time.

Sometimes states are tempted to put many things - many requests because there are so many needs in child welfare, into a vendor contract. And that may set the vendor up to fail from the very beginning.

And then likewise the vendors I think are sometimes have unrealistic expectations about what they can actually deliver. And I think sometimes there's an incentive, you know, depending on how the RFP is structured to have the vendor underbid the contract with the full expectation that they're going to do many change orders.

And so while you - for your own project within an RFP you may have some control over that. If you're in a state environment where there's a history of allowing or having a business practice of choosing lowest bidders and then having expenses, change orders that modify your scope and cost. You send a mixed message really to the vendor community about what your expectations are.

So I think it's really one of the biggest challenges from the beginning of a project to make sure that you have a good understanding of what your expectations are and what the vendor can actually deliver for the cost.

Another thing we found helpful in Ohio is that it's important to have a vendor, at least in our experience, who is local and who is committed to your project. These projects are complex and take a long time to complete.

And so it’s been helpful for the vendor to be someone who may have other business interests in your space because you want a vendor who really is going to be committed to your success.

And while they may bring in talent, you know, from everywhere. And that’s helpful to your team in terms of building competency. It’s been helpful in Ohio to have a vendor who has been - has a business interest beyond your project to stay committed basically to make sure that your project - they’re going to be around basically for a while. And they want to make sure that you’re happy. And that your project is successful.

For us it’s been really helpful to have cross teams of state staff with vendor staff. The state staff obviously have historical knowledge and knowledge of regulations and politics within your state.

And vendor staff often have a lot more flexibility and access to talent to be able to work on a quicker timeframe or outside of the union structure. And that can really augment your team.

Other things I think that are important if you can is to think about the cost structure from the very beginning for the item of work that you’d like to have accomplished.

In Ohio we view different payment structures for different kinds of projects. And we’ve tried to have as much flexibility within those payment structures as we can.

Obviously if you have something that is changing like child welfare, that’s dynamic. You know, there’s some work that makes more sense to be deliverable, fixed price based. And some that is more - makes more sense to have time and materials.

So thinking through, you know, what type of payment structure best fits that work. And building in flexibility when you do run into issues, you know, and having a framework for how you're going to deal with those issues ahead of time. How they'll be escalated.

Hopefully within your project team, rather than to your agency's leadership to have to either go get more money or manage your contract.

And then the other basic thing I think is just to have a mutual understanding of what both sides need to be successful. The state, you know, is often concerned about services and about regulations.

And the vendor is often concerned about making sure that, you know, they're getting paid and that they have the talent that they need in order to deliver the deliverable that they promised, as well as an infrastructure that has the technology tools that they need in order to be successful.

Joyce Rose: Excellent. I think at the very beginning, discussing what is win/win for not only the state, but also for the vendor and sharing that, communicating that to each other is really important. And I think it sets the tone of contract management.

Woman: Yes. I think the other thing that has been helpful to us is, you know, it sounds obvious, but really building the relationship so that you can have honest discussions about the status of projects.

I think some of our experience, you know, you might always hear things are maybe better or people aren't confident enough on your team to really tell you, you know, when you've gone off track or when things - when you run into problems.

So maintaining communication frequently as others has talked about in their discussions, as well as making sure that you have the trust when things are not going well. That you can head off that becoming a major issue or a major problem.

Joyce Rose: Absolutely. And having those honest discussions is not easy. But it certainly is of most benefit.

So Tresa, thank you so very much for sharing your insights. And I - actually I want to thank the entire panel for not only providing your insights and sharing your experiences and your wisdom.

But I hope that this discussion has really not only been insightful, but also beneficial to all of our attendees.

So now let's open up the Q and A portion of this Webinar, Elizabeth do you want to give the instructions here?

Elizabeth Mertinko: Actually I'm going to turn it over to Catherine, our operator. Catherine if you could let people know how they can line up to ask questions.

Coordinator: Certainly. Please un-mute your phone and press star 1. Only record your first and last name. If you would like to withdraw your question, you may press star 2.

Once again, press star 1 on your touchtone phone, one moment for the first question.

Joyce Rose: Do we have any questions from our attendees? We have this expert panel here. Lots of different states approaches to system management. So let's take advantage of this panel that we have. Do we have any questions?

Coordinator: Once again please press star 1 on your touchtone phone.

Elizabeth Mertinko: I don't have any online so hopefully people are lining up to ask on the phone.

Coordinator: At this time we have no questions in queue.

Elizabeth Mertinko: Okay while we're waiting, I didn't know if our panelists had any other points that they wanted to add or maybe anything that they wanted to talk a little bit about more. I know we ran through a lot of information really quickly.

Coordinator: We do have one question from the phone.

Woman: It's a comment.

Elizabeth Mertinko: Comments are fine.

Woman: Okay great. I just wanted to say that the information shared to day was extremely helpful. And we've run into several of the issues that were explained today. And I really valued the insight that was shared with us. So thank you. And that's it. Thank you very much.

Elizabeth Mertinko: Oh thank you, wonderful.

Joyce Rose: Excellent, excellent.

Coordinator: Once again to ask your question you may press star 1 on your phone.

Joyce Rose: All right let’s - well I guess we’ll just assume that our expert panel did an excellent job of addressing issues for all of you. Again, if you want to, you can send me emails and I can forward your question or comments to any of the panelists.

Elizabeth Mertinko: Catherine do we have someone on the line?

Coordinator: Actually no.

Elizabeth Mertinko: Oh I’m sorry. I thought you were trying to say we did. Okay go ahead Joyce. I’m sorry.

Joyce Rose: Okay so again, we’ll just make an assumption that our panelists really gave you a lot of information that you need to process or think about. And again if you want to send me any questions, please, please do.

So let’s move to our wrap up. And I’m going to move on to the next slide. And I’m just going to share just a little bit of humor with you, ten very interesting but not uncommon ways to potentially guarantee the failure of a systems project.

The first one: don’t use a specific methodology because toting is all that is really important. The next one: create the project plan by working backwards from a drop dead system completion date.

Number three is don’t bother with a data model. Just build whatever tables you need. Number four is use a technical lead that has never built a similar system. Hiring such talent is way too expensive.

And the fifth one is hire forwarding developers to make the toting go faster. The sixth one, build a system in Java even though most of the development team still things Java is simply coffee.

Number seven, three months before the system goes live, assign one junior developer to handle the data migration. I think we all remember the beta cleansing issue.

So the eighth one: skip the testing phase because the project is way behind schedule. Number nine: change the system to support critical new requirements discovered during final development.

And then lastly, buy a cast product, a commercial off the shelf package or a transfer system and then customize the heck out of it. Just customize it a lot. So hopefully that adds a little humor to our day.

And moving then to our wrap up, today we have shared the insights of an expert and experienced panel regarding some of the kind of pitfalls that all large IT projects face.

And what’s next? Any follow up regarding any questions we will provide. And then of course information regarding the topics of the next webinar five and six in August and September will be forthcoming.

Again, this webinar has been recorded. And it will be made available online. And when it is complete and posted we will send you a message via the SACWIS manager's list center with the link.

And there is the link that all of the other three webinars are posted for your access. I want to thank you all for attending. And we encourage you to submit any specific ideas for another webinar topic to me at the email listed above, joyce@kassets.com.

Again, thank you to our marvelous panel. And that's a wrap. Good bye.

Coordinator: This will conclude today's conference. All parties may disconnect.