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Budget-tightening, layoffs, and increases in caseloads for nutrition assistance, Medicaid, and other work supports in the wake of the Great Recession left Illinois with overworked staff and underserved clients. Outdated technology—staff still used paper case files—and a culture of crisis management rather than long-term planning added to the strain.

State leaders knew they had to overhaul their work support system, making it easier for families to get and keep benefits and reducing the burden on staff. They felt the status quo was unsustainable, especially with health care reform changes fast approaching.

In 2011, Illinois won a Work Support Strategies (WSS) grant to help streamline the system for connecting low-income families to work support benefits. Supported by private philanthropy, this multiyear initiative gave grants to select states to test and implement more effective and integrated approaches to delivering key work supports, including health coverage, nutrition benefits, and child care assistance. Simplifying and modernizing these processes can help improve the health and well-being of low-income families, save states money, and improve overall efficiency.

Illinois’ Goals for the Planning Year

Illinois has a history of generous social policy legislation but has often struggled to implement those policies. It’s a large state with about 90 local social service offices—known as Family Community Resource Centers (FCRCs)—that administer most of Illinois’s work support

Work Support Strategies

Work Support Strategies (WSS) is a multiyear initiative to simplify the process of getting work support benefits. Working directly with selected states, WSS seeks to

- improve the health and well-being of low-income families by increasing enrollment in work support programs;
- deliver benefits more effectively and efficiently, reducing administrative burdens on states as well as clients; and
- evaluate the impact of these streamlined approaches, disseminate lessons learned, and inform state and federal policies.

WSS focuses on three work support programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and child care subsidies through the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Participating states may choose to add other programs, and most have done so.

In fall 2010, WSS invited states to apply for one-year planning grants, with the opportunity to continue to a three-year implementation phase. Twenty-seven states submitted applications, and nine were competitively selected: Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, and South Carolina. During the planning phase, the selected states received $250,000, expert technical assistance, and peer support from other states. With these resources, the grantees performed intensive diagnostic self-assessments, explored business process strategies, established leadership structures, and developed data-driven action plans that address policy and practice changes.

This report is one of 10 (one on each state, plus a cross-cutting report) describing state activities during the planning year.
programs. Just a few years ago, the state had 135 local offices but had to close several of them because of budget cuts. The number of staff has fallen by 40 percent while caseloads have risen, leaving individual workers with workloads of well over 2,000 cases. And information on all those cases is not stored electronically; paper files for each case are maintained at the FCRC where the recipient applied for assistance.

During the planning year, Illinois’s primary goal was to develop and test a strategy for improving its processes “on the ground” in the local offices. Illinois officials felt that the status quo of inefficient business processes, antiquated technology, and paper case files was unsustainable. Families were not being effectively served and staff were overburdened and saddled with inefficient processes. State officials believed that improving local office operations was a critical first step if technology and policy changes had any hope of success. Increasing the urgency was the prospect of health reform, enacted early in the planning year, which was expected to enroll hundreds of thousands of people in Medicaid in a short amount of time.

State Background

In January 2009, former lieutenant governor Patrick Quinn had been moved up to replace outgoing governor Rod Blagojevich, who had been impeached following his arrest on federal corruption charges. Governor Quinn won election in his own right in November 2010, during the WSS selection process.

Governor Quinn’s Secretary for Human Services, Michelle Saddler, took a leave of absence from that role to serve as his Chief of Staff for four months in 2010, returning as secretary in December, just as the WSS selection was being made. She had both public sector and private nonprofit experience, bringing wide credibility to the agency. The WSS project was led by Jennifer Wagner, the Associate Director of the Division of Family and Community Services in the Department of Human Services (DHS). Ms. Wagner was recruited by Secretary Saddler from her previous position as a legal advocate on behalf of low-income families. The core WSS team also included officials overseeing food assistance, child care, health care, staff training, and local office operations.

Work Support Programs Included in Illinois’ Planning Year

- **SNAP**: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- **Medicaid and CHIP**: Medical Assistance and All Kids
- **CCAP**: Child Care Assistance Program
Three people were hired as full-time contractors specifically for the WSS project: one to manage the project, one to facilitate business process changes in the local offices, and one to assemble and compile data.

This report is organized into six topics that were key to Illinois’s planning year: creating change on the front lines, building a state-local team, using data to manage effectively despite blind spots, aligning policies across programs and agencies, enhancing credibility with external partners, and managing the project effectively.

Creating Change on the Front Lines

“We saw increased absenteeism, unscheduled absences, and huge usage of furlough days. [Staff] were on burnout and welcomed anything different that would show them relief.”

—Local office administrator involved in a WSS pilot

“[WSS] is the first time someone has focused on the actual process by which the work gets done.”

—Community stakeholder
Motivating the WSS project at all levels was a clear recognition that the status quo was not working. With a shrinking number of staff and increasing number of clients, remaining staff had a tremendous and growing workload. Both state and local officials emphasized the major morale challenges, the high level of job stress, and the consequences of that stress, including greater absenteeism. With no hope of hiring more staff in the near future, the only solution seemed to be improving efficiency, making it easier and faster for staff to do their jobs.

Thus, the Illinois WSS team analyzed and tested business processes as its core strategy to begin addressing what one core WSS team member called the “completely dysfunctional, broken system” in the local offices. This was an important and new choice for the state where, despite the scale of the local office challenges, no one had been able to make fixing them a true priority. Solving these problems, one state staff member said, had been “talked about for a long time but only in ‘free time.’ There isn’t a lot of free time. [WSS] has momentum behind it and having [the WSS project manager] and other staff there was important for a lot of follow-through.”

An early set of questions was how to go about developing new ideas for the local offices and where to do it. The core team decided to act as early as possible, choosing a pilot strategy rather than extensive central office planning. As they thought about how to make on-the-ground changes, the concept of piloting changes in local offices “seemed obvious,” according to a state WSS leader, because “we knew [local office staff] would have suggestions and complaints. Local office staffers are on the front lines every day and know what the challenges are and have ideas for solutions.” The WSS core team discussed at length the appropriate number and characteristics of pilot sites, including the overall volume of customers in an office, the size of workloads, and office locations. The team also drew on input from people who had engaged in a similar process in New Mexico. In the end, they decided to select three offices that would enable them to assess a range of solutions in varying environments. The WSS team hoped to identify which issues were results of the office location and which were results of office practices.

The three pilot offices selected—the Southeast FCRC (Chicago), Northern FCRC (northern Cook County), and DuPage FCRC (suburban Chicagoland)—represented the three largest regions in the state. Also, each office was struggling with the overall volume of customers, the size of workloads, or both. Business process analyses were begun one office at a time and
Office Redesign Pilots

In all three pilot offices, the goal of the business process changes is to move from crisis management to process management. Under the traditional organizational structure, frontline workers handle cases for all three programs managed in the FCRCs—SNAP, Medicaid, and cash assistance—and focus either on intake or on coordination for ongoing cases. Individual clients see one worker for intake and then are assigned a caseworker who serves as their primary contact from that time forward.

Under the new model being tested in the pilot offices, clients no longer see a single caseworker for all aspects of their case but instead deal with different workers for different tasks. For example, some workers interview clients while others process client paperwork. In addition, the pilot offices have set up small call centers and “express desks.” Call center staff answer phone calls, which allows other workers to focus on processing cases. This new system is reportedly more efficient than having workers try to answer calls, service clients, and process cases at the same time. The express desk handles client needs that can be addressed in 10 to 15 minutes, such as reporting a change of address or obtaining a temporary medical card. The express desk saves customers’ time, allowing them to have these simple tasks handled more quickly than when they needed to wait in a single line for services.

Although this process was guided primarily by Illinois’s WSS and office staff, they received some assistance from WSS technical assistance partners Aclara Group and the Southern Institute. A representative from the Southern Institute shared information about how other states had approached some of the same changes and business process management issues facing Illinois. Illinois WSS staff members also were influenced by the WSS-supported peer-to-peer site visits to local offices in Idaho, New Mexico, Washington, and Colorado. “They came back with so much enthusiasm!” a WSS leader said of state staff returning from these visits. “We had a local manager who was visiting New Mexico for vacation and just called a local office to look at it.”

In Southeast, the first pilot office, these changes have already vastly improved service delivery, according to office staff. Clients are often called for an interview the day after they apply and receive benefits within two weeks.

expanded late in the planning year to a fourth site (see box for more details.) The pilots were seen as the beginning of real change. One community stakeholder noted that progress takes time, but that she has seen positive developments, particularly in the Southeast office. “When you change things up, [they] get worse before they get better, but then we have noticed positive changes, more accountability as well,” she said. “We’ve heard more from staff that the new model is working and processing more efficiently….Part of it is that at the end of the day, the cases are being processed better, so we are cutting down on a million people coming in.”

While WSS was testing a new business process model in the pilot offices, Secretary Saddler was rolling out a broad initiative to improve morale in each local office. The initiative is called Local Office PRIDE for partnership (among state and workers), rebalancing resources, integrated service delivery, data-driven decisionmaking, and efficient management of core human services. The project focused first on creating a “culture of caring” within the FCRCs by improving customer service and making relatively low-cost improvements to the office environment, such as cleaning and repainting the centers and improving signage. These efforts
aimed to boost morale and generate pride among office staff. Clients, too, would benefit from the better office environment and improved customer service from happier workers. The WSS opportunity dovetailed with the objectives of the PRIDE initiative and linking the two helped both projects move forward.

In Southeast, the first pilot office, the process of evaluating and revising business practices fully involved frontline staff. The WSS core team had its own ideas but wanted to hear ideas from frontline staff about how they would restructure their work to become more efficient and more effectively help clients. In a series of local office meetings facilitated by the WSS team, caseworkers initially voiced complaints about their workloads and work processes, but they later proposed solutions and drafted specific plans for change. Subcommittees of caseworkers focused on improving specific areas, such as the waiting room, the outdated technology, the intake process, and web applications.

Caseworkers’ direct involvement helped them take ownership of the process at every step, according to the WSS team members we interviewed and the caseworkers themselves. The caseworkers expressed appreciation for this approach and noted how different it was from their past experiences with change, where management told them what to do. As the changes were implemented, the local office administrator played a key role in ensuring that staff followed through with the plan. The WSS team supported implementation by setting up a filing system and by helping the office manager and staff see how to use data as a management tool.

In the Northern and DuPage offices, local staff did not have to build the business process changes from the ground up. They were able to learn from the procedures established at the first pilot office and adjust as necessary.

As Illinois’s WSS leaders introduced the process of change in each pilot office, they learned that they needed to balance their interest in having standardized, consistent processes across offices with the flexibility to accommodate each office’s diverse needs. The three initial pilot offices had different communities, advocates, and politics, as well as varying caseload sizes and amounts of foot traffic. In addition, the WSS staff we interviewed noted that while the new business process model was showing promise in the pilot offices—which are among the state’s larger offices—a different model might be more appropriate in smaller offices. Acknowledging
the unique situation of each office was important not only for recognizing potentially different needs but also for gaining the buy-in of local staff.

To gain staff buy-in and find the right approach for each office, the WSS team asked local staff to engage in the process of identifying problems and finding solutions. However, staff in one of the later pilot offices said they thought WSS would have received greater buy-in if the initial brainstorming about solutions had been more circumscribed by what was actually possible. One staff member analogized the process of building a new business model to building a new house; in this case, staffers are not custom designing a house but rather choosing from a set of optional floor plans and selecting fixtures and paint colors. Limiting the scope of the discussion in this way could help focus staff energy on developing a realistic business process model.

Workers in the Southeast office reportedly became more comfortable with their new roles over the months. At the time of our interviews, workers in one of the later pilot offices were still experiencing the pain of change and, at best, were cautiously optimistic that those changes eventually would be worthwhile. Another pilot office had initially resisted altering its work process but was slowly integrating some of the suggested changes.

State WSS leaders thought that it would be intuitive to frontline staff that “moving from crisis management to process management” would reduce staff stress. “You don’t have to walk into the office and be scared about what’s going to happen,” a state WSS leader said. Under the new model, staff would be “looking at the data and planning ahead. It may be more work but it’s not as stressful and hectic daily. That’s the incentive.” But leaders found that this potential for improvement was not obvious to staff in advance, perhaps because of a long and painful history where changes did not, in fact, make their work better. “In our environment, we have a human element, and it is the hardest thing to tackle,” the state leader said. “It’s based on workers who have been here a long time, and they are not used to change.” As a result, WSS leaders learned to be clearer about this incentive when talking with staff in the future.

For clients, too, adapting to the changing process takes time. On the one hand, clients suffered under the old system. According to a state WSS team member: “Most of the time, clients are pissed off. They’ve been waiting; we lose their paperwork.” On the other hand, clients
were accustomed to always talking to the same caseworker who they felt was knowledgeable about their case. Under the new model, clients were triaged to whichever worker was first available to assist them, including workers staffing the express desk. While the new process allowed clients to be seen faster, some were frustrated that they could not see or call the caseworker they knew. However, the reality in recent years was that workers’ caseloads were so high that they were not able to be knowledgeable about all their clients, see them promptly, or answer their calls. Advocates and state officials we interviewed expected that customers’ concerns would dissipate as they began to see that the new process was truly serving them more quickly.

In Illinois, a key aspect of working with local office staff is working with unions: one union for the child care system and a separate union for the other DHS employees. In the DHS local offices, all employees except the local office administrator are union members. In two of the pilot offices, the unionized staffers have largely embraced the changes, according to the local staff and the state officials we interviewed. However, one office resisted the piloted changes—at least initially. The unions have been concerned about having staff work outside the parameters of their contract. The piloted changes have been within those parameters, but implementing those changes required some explanation and discussion with local office union leaders.

The union’s executive leadership formally withdrew participation from the WSS local office advisory committee—a group that advises DHS and includes representatives from key nonprofit and advocacy organizations—but did not actively oppose the project. State officials explained that this was a sensitive time for the unions because the governor had recently announced pay freezes and office closures, which were beyond the control of DHS. According to the people we interviewed at the state and local levels, the union’s greatest concern is losing jobs to privatization. While this is a longstanding union concern, it may have been heightened by events related to state employees and private contracting in the neighboring states of Wisconsin and Indiana. When staff understand that the WSS changes are designed to improve their work environment and reduce their burdens, most have embraced the changes.

To support the switch to a task-based model of doing business, the state needed to upgrade its outdated technology and filing system. The computer system in use was reportedly from 1989
and built on a former system from 1972. When people knowledgeable about this technology began retiring a decade ago, they were sometimes hired back as contractors, but many were not able to continue working. The WSS team and state leaders expect that investments in technology upgrades will pay the state back in increased efficiency.

An important part of upgrading the state’s technology was transitioning from paper case files to electronic documents. Because this process takes considerable time, the state focused first on electronically generating the documents it uses most often. The state reported that the move to electronic documents paid for itself within 3 months by saving 2 million pieces of paper between December 2011 and March 2012. Over the next 18 months, the state planned to convert more of its paperwork to electronic documents.

**Building a State-Local Team to Scale Up Reform**

“The hardest angle is on the ground. The management and leadership at the local level have to support it and do the change.”

—WSS leadership team member

“[To scale up change, you need people to] raise their hands and take things on.”

—WSS leadership team member

Building a strong relationship between the state agency, DHS, and local office staff turned out to be crucial for WSS to succeed, even though everyone involved works for the same state agency, not for separate jurisdictions as in other states that operate through counties. Early in the planning year, the WSS team was surprised to realize that local office staffers were resistant to working with the two people hired from outside DHS to manage the WSS project and facilitate the business process changes in the pilot offices. Because they were hired from outside the department and did not have firsthand knowledge of processes, nor were they in the direct chain of command, they lacked credibility with local office staff. The two managers learned they needed buy-in and support from the leadership on the ground—the local office administrator and the regional administrator—before the local staff would get on board.
In response, midway through the planning year, the core team made an effort to better engage the regional administrators who oversaw the pilot offices. Although they had previously been part of the kickoff and planning meetings, it was essential to have their complete buy-in and active participation to grant the appropriate authority to the project. With their support, team members recruited from outside the department could be more effective. For example, the person tasked with facilitating changes in the local offices had no direct authority over local office staff and therefore could not require changes. She had to find ways to be, what she called, a “nudger.” Having the vocal support of the local office administrators helped her build relationships and credibility over the course of the planning year. As one state team member said, reflecting on the original reluctance to welcome the new team, “In our business, you have to build relationships.”

Another strategy used to draw local office managers into the project was offering change management training. Again, a balance of inside and outside experts turned out to be helpful to build credibility for the team. In the initial pilot office, an outside consultant with the WSS project provided the training. Subsequent training sessions included the same material but were given by a well-known and respected state-level supervisor. Staff knew the trainer, and the trainer knew how to bring in the local context. A local office administrator who attended both training sessions reported that having a trainer the staff identified with was very valuable.

As indicated in the last section, trust with local staff in the pilot offices was further enhanced by giving them some control over the design of the changes and over their roles in the changing office environment. When local office leaders or staff took ownership of the project, the WSS team saw this as a key accomplishment and one of the more rewarding aspects of the year. A local office case manager captured this feeling of ownership when asked whether local staff felt included: “Oh, very much—because we were the ones to come up with the plan.”

Overall, respondents emphasized that leadership among the local office managers was crucial to the long-term success of WSS. Their buy-in and ownership of the program changes were at least as important as the commitment of state-level leadership for the project’s success. Local office staff members look to their managers for direction, more so than to their state leaders. Both the recognition of the importance of local leadership and the degree to which local managers exhibited leadership increased over the course of the planning year.
But building trust, a sense of ownership, and a collaborative team did not address all the local office management challenges along the way to taking the frontline reforms to scale. As one WSS leader said, “Fundamental issues with employment and management and accountability are still there, even if you change the process.” In particular, rolling out new business processes revealed underlying problems with management skills and accountability that needed to be addressed before any new process could be successful. When the business process consultants from the WSS team were in the local offices, they found examples of staff who were not accountable—for example, staff taking extra-long breaks—and managers who were not giving staff clear priorities or expectations about their work. According to a local office administrator, local office managers typically had not received management training, forcing them to learn by trial and error, which sometimes left them without effective management skills.

The WSS team learned from these experiences that building management skills and creating clear structures for every role in the local office was crucial to expanding to scale. This insight became a part of the WSS approach in the planning year, with the intention of building toward a more ambitious approach to training and staff development during the implementation period. In meetings with managers about business process changes, the WSS team also took the opportunity to provide basic leadership development and managerial training. Addressing these issues sometimes required painful conversations and the introduction of new structures, but these changes alone resulted in improved productivity. For example, increased clarity about data and measures, described in the next section, was one part of the additional structure.

As part of their management training, local office administrators received information about labor relations and guidance for working closely with the union. Because all local office staff except the administrator is a union member, local office administrators needed good advice about labor relations to provide their own teams with the support needed to supervise and manage effectively.

**Using Data to Manage Despite the Blind Spots**

“There are hundreds or thousands of reports generated. They are overwhelming and so detailed, no one looks at them.”

—WSS leadership team member
“There is just no culture [of using data]. There was not an office-by-office recognition of using data....The issues that rise up are handled and those that don’t [are not].”

—WSS leadership team member

During the planning year, the Illinois team sought to find data measures and formats that could help managers monitor ongoing business performance. In keeping with its overall interest in changing processes on the ground, the team was more interested in how management used data. The WSS team was particularly interested in data that could help local office managers improve performance and help state staff hold local offices accountable; they were less interested in data for policy or other state-level uses. The goal was to shift the focus from the fact that offices were understaffed to specific areas that could be improved within the current staffing limitations.

Encountering many challenges along the way, the WSS team nonetheless persisted and found initial solutions to the technical and culture-change issues surrounding the use of data.

Prior to WSS, data was used mainly for federal reporting purposes. As a result, the sheer number and outdated format of hundreds of data reports produced by Illinois’ legacy system were overwhelming to state and local office staff, and made it difficult to recognize useful program metrics.

In addition, at both the state and local levels, the barriers to using data effectively were grounded in history and culture. At the state level, the DHS central office collects extensive data through its automated systems but has had little connection with the research and analysis group that could help them use the data effectively. Members of the research group “are being pulled in many directions,” one WSS team member said. “If the legislature or governor needs something, everything [else] is dropped.”

The local level also has had a history of not using data effectively. For example, while some offices looked at lists of SNAP cases that had not yet been processed, there was no effort to look systematically at data on SNAP timeliness. When state officials figured out how to generate a count of SNAP cases one day away from hitting the 30-day processing deadline, local offices were not initially interested. State officials said local offices were initially “resistant” when shown performance data about SNAP timeliness, including a ranking of which local offices were most timely. Local office staff felt that the data did not accurately capture their on-the-ground
work and that data like this most likely would be used punitively, to highlight problems and enforce accountability, as opposed to being used to manage workloads.

The WSS team pursued several strategies to move through these obstacles. First, to better understand what available data could support ongoing program management and the project’s goals, the WSS core team hired a full-time data lead. The data lead’s primary responsibility was compiling data from existing reports automatically generated by the state’s IT system. Early in the planning year, the national WSS technical assistance team suggested as a diagnostic activity on data capacity that states provide data on a set of indicators, including participation in multiple work support programs and the extent to which families fail to recertify benefits but reapply within a few months. This set of indicators served as a framework for Illinois’s WSS data analysis and helped to prioritize which data elements to collect from the various automated reports. The state WSS team used the exercise to explore new uses for the data, such as developing a count of SNAP cases that have gone unprocessed past the 30-day deadline—meaning that applicants may be going without needed benefits.

Second, the core WSS team devoted time during weekly meetings to review the data that was being continuously assembled. They were pleased and surprised to realize that some of the needed data elements were in the pile of old reports, even though no one knew they were there. That discovery helped them see a path toward measurement, even though they knew there was a long way to go.

The compiling and review of data also generated new data requests. Metrics such as churning in the SNAP program were not generated through the electronic reporting system and required the development of new analysis reports. The data lead was responsible for coordinating the core team’s data requests with the state’s Bureau of Research and Analysis. While he was able to move some of these requests, development of the new data analysis and reports was slow, due in part to competition for the data bureau’s limited time and resources.

While the data analysis was primarily focused on Medicaid and SNAP data, which were more accessible, the WSS project opened the way for analyses of churning in the child care subsidy system.
Third, the WSS team compiled the data into a “data dashboard,” which consolidates information from the hundreds of automated system data reports and provides a reader-friendly report of the most pertinent performance measures. Previously, there had been too many reports to sift through, many with cryptic field names, making them ineffective for routine analysis or performance accountability.

During the WSS planning year, the project’s data lead identified the information available in the state’s mainframe system and worked with the WSS core team to determine which elements to include in the data dashboard. By the end of the planning year, the data dashboard was an Excel spreadsheet that the data lead had compiled manually. The next step is to generate and e-mail one-page monthly dashboard reports for each local office. Efforts also were getting underway to automate the process of compiling this information. The team was also developing new reports that measure program churn, retention, and procedural denials with some degree of consistency, unlike current measures. The state-level staff we interviewed noted that field staff would need to be trained in how to understand and make use of the information in the monthly data dashboard reports.

According to our interviews, the WSS data framework and regular meetings have helped lead to a culture shift around using data at both the state and local levels. Regular meetings with some local office managers have introduced the concept of using data for daily management. For example, data on timeliness can help identify a bottleneck in the process. This bottleneck could sometimes be easily remedied, improving performance even though the office did not get additional staff. According to a WSS team member, having monthly check-in meetings with local offices “gives us the opportunity to walk through the data. And sometimes it’s a really tough meeting. But this is where we’ve seen the results. What we do is to give the offices the tools, and the system of accountability means the offices will use those tools.” State-level officials reported introducing the concept of using data constructively; they also spoke explicitly about data being used to enhance accountability at all leadership levels.
Lining Up Policy across Programs and Agencies

“[The child care policy work] was about how, as a state, we’re operating and applying rules....If it’s confusing and complex to you as an agency that is used to doing this day-to-day...how do you think your clients understand it?”

—WSS team member

While Illinois initially focused its planning year energy on business processes in the local offices, its scan of policy issues turned up important opportunities as well. These included simplifying complex and inconsistent child care policies, making it easier for families to navigate the system, and improving communication across the agencies that manage child care assistance. The WSS team also worked to coordinate health care reform with WSS and aimed to synchronize policies across agencies and work support programs to smooth the way for local office changes.

Aligning and simplifying child care policies
Illinois is one of very few states to guarantee child care assistance to eligible families. It has made a major commitment to child care policy and to adequately financing the program. While administration for other work supports falls under local DHS offices, child care assistance is managed by Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies, which are nonprofits under contract to the state. During welfare reform, administration for child care assistance was deliberately separated from that of other work support programs to emphasize child care as early education. However, according to the child care officials and advocates we interviewed, the separation resulted in a lack of knowledge and coordination between child care and other work supports. Coordination between the DHS local offices and the CCR&Rs remains closest for families receiving both child care assistance and TANF, dating back to times when all recipients of child care assistance received TANF. However, now only 8 percent of families receiving child care assistance also receive TANF, compared with 70 percent of them receiving SNAP.

DHS leadership and child care leaders recognize that the local DHS office staff and the CCR&Rs need to take greater responsibility for communicating with each other to connect families with a full package of supports and to avoid bouncing families back and forth between offices.
The state child care director said that she came into the WSS planning year thinking that the goal should be improving communication between the local offices and the CCR&Rs, but she came to see that this would be easier to achieve if processes and definitions were better aligned across programs. Simplifying child care policies not only made it easier for families to navigate the program, but also gave the state a foundation for aligning child care with the other work support systems (see the box for further details).

To improve relationships between the local offices and the CCR&Rs, representatives from the local office pilot sites and the CCR&Rs met throughout the planning year. The discussions created a shared understanding of policies, procedures, and the needs of the clients. Also, local DHS offices assigned liaisons to work directly with CCR&Rs. Now, when a CCR&R worker needs to, for example, verify client information, he can contact the liaison rather than wait to hear back from a caseworker who has other priorities.

**Improving Medicaid coordination in preparation for health reform**

To improve child care linkages, DHS has to connect to external nonprofit partners. To improve health linkages, it needs to connect to a partner state agency, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS). DHS handles enrollment and eligibility determination for Medicaid, while HFS is responsible for all other aspects of the program. Since 2007, a DHS employee has served as a liaison between DHS and HFS for Medicaid. Her role and other cross-agency initiatives (for example, the Human Services Framework, a longstanding initiative intended to create smarter, friendlier government services that also save the state money) have served as a basis for the closer linkages between health and human services now required by WSS and for preparation for health reform.

Illinois’s efforts to prepare for implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) are a concrete step on the path toward these closer linkages. Since 2010, staffers from the Department of Insurance, HFS, and DHS have been meeting regularly to forge a common vision for health reform implementation. This group—the Eligibility Modernization Oversight Group—includes the WSS project lead, who is also Associate Director of the Division of Family and Community Services in DHS.
Early Lessons From The Work Support Strategies Initiative: Illinois

Child Care Policy Assessment

Using the WSS technical assistance self-assessment process, Illinois examined how its child care policies could be simplified to improve administrative efficiency. As part of this self-assessment, the state brought together a broad set of stakeholders, including staff from local CCR&R offices, DHS staff, and state advocates.

The stakeholders began by reviewing the federal requirements for using the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which funds the child care assistance program, and identifying where the state had added its own requirements for parents. They discovered that the state’s requirements, developed within very broad federal guidelines, included many complex rules, whereas the federal guidelines allow for a much simpler processes. The child care officials we interviewed reported that no data were available to determine whether the additional requirements were effective. The officials could not say, for example, whether requiring parents to submit two paystubs yielded better income information than asking them to submit just one.

Reviewing the child care policies revealed how complex and confusing they were, even to the child care assistance program managers themselves. Clients, they noted, must have a difficult time navigating the rules. The stakeholders also found that policies were applied inconsistently throughout the state. Overall, they reported that the policy assessment process was refreshing, as they realized the changes they could make to simplify the state’s child care subsidy policies.

The group identified a number of policies and practices that could benefit from closer examination and possible revision. These included eligibility requirements and related documentation/verification requirements, application form and application processes, redetermination requirements and frequency, and change reporting requirements. A key element of their plan was to ask active committees within the child care community for their input and review about some of identified issues, which also served to lay the groundwork for successful implementation. The team also decided that child care could benefit from the same business process review used for the other work support systems—and made that a priority in the action plan.

The process of coordinating health care reform with WSS has evolved over time. The WSS proposal was written at the same time that the Eligibility Modernization Oversight Group was forming. The two initiatives have worked together with increasing coherence. The technology associated with health care reform is expected to be the basis for a comprehensive health and human services framework. That technology includes a new eligibility system (using 90-10 funding) and call centers for Medicaid as well as the other human service programs, including TANF and SNAP. In this sense, health care reform is leading the way for changes in the broader human services system in Illinois. At the same time, the business process changes in the local DHS offices will be essential for ensuring that the system can accommodate the influx of health insurance applicants expected with health care reform.

Aligning policies across child care, Medicaid, and SNAP

In addition to reviewing policies within the child care subsidy program, the Illinois WSS team reviewed the state’s SNAP, medical, child care, and TANF policies to identify possibilities for further alignment across programs. The team examined the eligibility and redetermination time
frames, as well as the documentation requirements and income definitions for each program. They found, for example, that the 6-month eligibility period for child care assistance did not align well with the 12-month eligibility period for medical, and are looking into ways to better align those policies. In addition, the WSS team found that nonrecurring income, like overtime pay, is counted by the child care subsidy program but not by SNAP. The team then determined which policy changes would require legislative action and which procedural policies they had the authority to change. At the end of the planning year, Illinois implemented a waiver that gave the state the authority to simplify its SNAP redetermination policies.

**Enhancing Credibility with External Partners**

“We’ve brought advocates on more as partners, [asking]... ‘If you were in my shoes, what would you do?’”

—Mantra for the new DHS team in working with outside partners, according to WSS leadership team member

“I always say that when I got to DHS, there was a moat around it. The moat went away, and the office dealt very constructively in the community.”

—Community stakeholder/local office advisory committee member

“Since I’ve been in the system a long time, I was hopeful but skeptical. I’ve been around these attempts for culture change. They’re always well-meaning but nothing really happens. Now something is really happening. I’m seeing the change versus a lot of words.”

—Community stakeholder/local office advisory committee member

Coordination and communication with stakeholders has been a priority for DHS both within and beyond the WSS project. DHS officials emphasized their commitment to partnering with other state agencies; with state workers in the local offices; and also with advocates, nonprofit organizations, and the broader community. The relationship between DHS leadership and the advocacy community is strong because a number of DHS leaders are former advocates. DHS leaders seek to be open and nondefensive with outside partners and to invite their best thinking. According to a WSS leadership team member, DHS leaders explained the state’s limitations and parameters, and then asked, “If you were in my shoes, what would you do?”
DHS receives formal input through its local office advisory committee—a group of representatives from service delivery and advocacy nonprofits. The committee has been tasked with providing input about the WSS project to Ms. Wagner in her dual role as the WSS project lead and Associate Director of the Division of Family and Community Services in DHS.

Advisory committee members credited the current DHS leadership with generally improved communication, compared with earlier times. They told us they feel their voices have been heard and incorporated into the WSS project. For example, DHS incorporated committee input into the revised wording of client notices and the priorities for Illinois’ WSS action plan. Community leaders with a child care focus and child care officials within the state said they appreciated that “the child care voice” was heard and even took center stage at times. For example, one CCR&R official told us that a WSS meeting had examined the work of CCR&Rs as a concrete example of quality customer service that brings dignity to people who seek services.

In addition, a key component for building trust with advocates, as with agency staff, was whether they believed that even the most skilled and best-intentioned team could make progress, given Illinois’s history and challenges. Some advocates who have been part of the human services system for many years said they initially were skeptical that these changes would be any different from past initiatives that have come and gone without meaningful change. However, as the pilot offices began to experience improvements from the new business processes, that success created hope for continued relief for the overburdened staff. Thus, they told us they were cautiously optimistic about the success of the project.

Some members of the local office advisory committee encouraged DHS to engage the nonprofit community even more formally as part of a strategy to better engage the broader community. They also encouraged attention to local communications with external partners as part of the WSS roll-out strategy with individual offices. Examples ranged from specific actions to get the word out about new changes (for example, having a pilot local office inform nonprofit partners about a new night dropbox and a new log at the front desk so they could, in turn, tell their clients) to broader communication with local political leaders. In addition, external advisors said that DHS’s openness about the new processes and the problems they’ve encountered will go a long way toward obtaining buy-in and building support within the broader community.
Building the Airplane in the Air

“We were really building the airplane in the air.”
—WSS team member

“We’re all running toward a river, and we hope the bridge will be built when we get there.”
—WSS team member, commenting on the approach to coordinating health reform implementation in the face of uncertainty

WSS team members described the planning year as “building the airplane in the air.” DHS leadership and office staff were figuring things out along the way, adapting their plan as they learned how to develop it. In this environment, it is challenging to keep the project moving, to identify and customize models, to share information, and to engage stakeholders. The team has to be systematic and organized yet also flexible, open to change, and resilient when the environment changes or things don’t work out according to plan.

Respondents highlighted two broad themes in explaining how they were able to succeed in this environment. First was the importance of leadership at all levels, particularly support and guidance from the very top: the Secretary of DHS and the Director of the Division of Family and Community Services. Both leaders were critical to setting the tone and communicating the vision for change. According to our interviews, their leadership was consistent throughout the WSS planning year.

The second theme was effective project management so that even when the broad context was changing, the specific details were under control. The WSS team decided to use the grant to hire a full-time project manager. Participants said that decision—and the skills of the project manager—were crucial to the planning year accomplishments. Unlike others on the WSS team, the project manager worked only on the WSS project and therefore had more time to devote to the initiative. Although local office staff had some hesitation about accepting someone from outside state government, program directors at the state level welcomed her contributions. Working under the broad guidance of the WSS project lead, the project manager convened weekly and monthly meetings of the core WSS team and other stakeholders, developed meeting agendas, set priorities among the operational tasks, kept track of activities and assignments,
followed up to ensure that assignments were completed, and kept everyone informed of the project’s progress and activities in the pilot offices. This structure and support moved the project along.

Under the project manager, two other full-time staff came on board during the planning year. One, trained in both public policy and industrial engineering, was responsible for facilitating the business process changes in the local offices. The other was a retired SNAP director, rehired as a contractor to assemble and compile data during the WSS planning year. He drew on his thorough understanding of SNAP data and federal reporting requirements gained from his prior role.

According to WSS project leaders, hiring dedicated staff to manage the project was crucial to WSS’s success, particularly in the intense and constantly changing context in which they worked. Hiring new staff, as either state employees or contractors, is a considerable challenge for Illinois state government due to regulations inspired, in part, by past abuses. The project leaders said that without the flexible funding of the WSS grant, they would not have been able hire such staff, which would have created a substantial obstacle to success.

A final lesson from the WSS planning year is that the process of change never ends. In the

**Illinois Planning-Year Activities**

Recruited a project manager, a data lead, and a business process expert.

Conducted major business process changes—particularly, moving toward task-based processes—in three pilot offices; those changes were planned with input from frontline staff.

Developed plans for rolling out changes to all 90 offices, including training for managers, recruitment of business process in-house experts, and a menu of options for the process.

Reviewed existing data and reports; eliminated reports that were not useful; and developed new data measures and formats for management, including a data dashboard.

Implemented SNAP waiver to simplify recertification process.

Conducted self-assessment of child care policies and eligibility processes, bringing together state staff, key outside stakeholders, and selected representatives from the nonprofits that manage subsidy eligibility processes.

Built close connections with the state’s health reform activities, including participating in the Eligibility Modernization Oversight Group and representing human services in the design of a new IT eligibility system and call centers that will include Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF programs.

Sought specific input on WSS goals from DHS’s Local Office Advisory Committee, a preexisting body made up largely of key nonprofit and advocacy organizations in the state that advises DHS.

Linked WSS closely with the Local Office PRIDE initiative, the umbrella for activities to improve local office morale.
initial pilot office, for example, a new business model is in place for handling the largest and most critical components of their work, but adjustments will need to be made over time to further improve the system and to adapt to other changes that occur. In addition, smaller components of the work have yet to be addressed. A state-level official expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn from other states’ examples and for the management training provided by the WSS technical assistance team. The official noted that continued support of this kind is needed as staff members implement changes, identify additional needs, and adapt as they move ahead with reforms.

Conclusions

At the start of the planning year, Illinois faced large and growing work support caseloads in a paper-based eligibility system, tight resources, staff shortages, and low staff morale. Over the planning year, the WSS team carried out concrete activities that helped them to develop a plan to streamline and improve the benefit delivery system. They reviewed policies and identified how and where to best align programs to simplify eligibility processes. This important early work included an assessment of child care subsidy policies and the state’s relationship with the nonprofit CCR&Rs that deliver benefits. Illinois worked with the available data and systems to develop a user-friendly report of key performance measures, which local office managers could use to guide their operations. The WSS team also paved the way for a major change in how local offices process benefit cases. The new task-based model was designed to improve efficiency, relieving the burden on overworked staff and making it easier for families to navigate the system. The WSS team tested these changes from planning to implementation in three pilot offices. Finally, having the WSS team involved in developing the new integrated eligibility system—which is being designed for health reform implementation—provided closer linkages between health and human services programs.

At the end of the planning year, Illinois was awarded a three-year implementation grant from the WSS project. Illinois’s action plan for the implementation stage describes how the state will make the changes the WSS team identified during the planning year. Changes in business processes and staff training will be rolled out to all 90 offices based on what was learned from the pilot tests. Policies will be changed to simplify and align eligibility and recertification
processes across programs. The data dashboard will be finalized and implemented, along with other data tools to help in office management. And, while continuing to work toward full implementation of the new integrated eligibility system, the state plans to expand online applications and move toward electronic case records in the short run. These actions serve to achieve the vision Illinois has held throughout the project: to “help Illinois’s families and individuals access the benefits they need to thrive, by reducing the burden the service delivery system places on staff, agencies, and customers,” as spelled out in the state’s action plan. WSS team members reported that the planning year allowed them to move toward this vision by developing and testing plans in a thoughtful way—plans they are now ready to implement statewide.
References


Methodological Note

This report is based on several sources, including evaluation team members’ on-site and telephone interviews with Illinois WSS team members and others in the state working on WSS and related efforts; WSS materials, including quarterly progress reports and quarterly call notes; and state documents, including the WSS proposal, action plan, presentations, relevant web sites, WSS data exercise results, evaluation documents, and other materials. During a four-day visit to Illinois in spring 2012, the evaluation team held 15 interviews with the WSS management team, local social service agencies, advisory committee members, local office case managers, and state agency leadership and staff from SNAP, child care, and Medicaid programs.

The goal of this Phase I evaluation was to draw on these sources to document Illinois’ activities during the WSS planning year, including the challenges the state encountered and the approaches chosen to overcome them. This goal arose from the particular features of the planning year and the nature of the lessons that could be distilled. During this phase, states were assessing their current strengths and weaknesses, and designing and testing potential next steps, culminating in the development of an action plan (with clear goals and measurable targets for reaching them). From an evaluation perspective, therefore, it was too early to assess whether states had met measurable goals, but not too early to document what actually did happen, what bumps occurred along the way, and how states responded. Thus, during the on-site visits, the evaluation team members attempted to gather input from varied perspectives, including local office staff and community stakeholders, but did not attempt to comprehensively gather input from all perspectives in order to evaluate the effectiveness of planning-year activities.

Six states (Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Carolina) are continuing on to Phase II of the evaluation. This next phase has three major goals: to document, understand, and draw lessons from the implementation of WSS activities in the states; to identify and track over time key outcomes that the state would expect to be affected by its activities and interventions; and to measure the effect WSS or specific activities under WSS had on key outcomes. To meet these goals, the Phase II evaluation will include implementation analyses and data tracking for all six states, and impact analyses to provide quantitative causal results where feasible. Each state’s evaluation will be tailored to its particular activities, goals, priorities, and data availability. The overall evaluation will combine information, analyzing data and results from across all six states.