

RESEARCH REPORT

Improving Business Processes for Delivering Work Supports for Low- Income Families

Findings from the Work Support Strategies Evaluation

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Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Executive Summary	vi
Developing Strategies for Improving Business Processes	vi
Making Changes to Business Processes	vii
Issues States Encountered When Changing Business Processes	ix
Monitoring and Measuring Outcomes	xiv
Conclusions	xv
Introduction	1
What Do Families Experience as They Apply for Work Supports?	2
Why Did WSS States Decide to Improve Business Processes?	4
What Is Business Process Reengineering?	6
How Did the WSS States Develop Strategies for Improving Business Processes?	8
Who Led the BPR Effort?	8
Diagnosing Problems through Process Mapping and Other Needs Assessments	9
Plan-Do-Study-Act Approach	11
BPR Contractor On-Site Support and Software	12
Pilots and Other Incremental Approaches	12
What Business Process Changes Did States Make?	15
Expectations for Processing Time and Place	15
Cross-Program Integration	16
Lobby	17
Allocation of Work	19
Standardization of Business Processes	24
What Issues Did States Encounter When Changing Business Processes?	26
Incremental Approaches and Continuous Improvement	26
Alignment with Technology	27
Data	28
Local Differences and County Control	30
Time Pressures, Large Workloads, and Temporary Setbacks	31
Pilot Office Selection	32
Staff Training on Process and Management	32
Staff and Management Abilities and Willingness to Change	34

Competing Priorities and Goals across Agencies	35
Commitment and Dedication of a Range of Actors	36
Communication and Collaboration	40
Funding	43
How Are States Monitoring and Measuring Progress and Efficiency?	45
Efficiency Improvements in Application Processing	45
Program Integrity and Accuracy	47
Client Experiences	47
Staff Morale	48
A Work in Progress	50
Conclusions	51
Notes	53
References	54
About the Authors	55
Statement of Independence	56

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Executive Summary

In delivering work supports to low-income families, “business process” refers to how a social service office organizes the work of greeting customers, accepting applications, making eligibility determinations, and all other aspects of helping individuals and families access and retain the supports for which they are eligible. Like other large public and private organizations, social service offices sometimes experience challenges with inefficient processes that use outdated technology, create unnecessary burdens, and do not work effectively for staff or families. This report examines the efforts of six states to address this challenge.

Work Support Strategies (WSS) is a multiyear, multistate, foundation-funded initiative to help low-income families get and keep the package of work supports for which they are eligible. Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Carolina were selected through a competitive process to participate in WSS, first in a planning and design year in 2011 and then in the implementation phase since 2012. Through grants, expert technical assistance, and peer learning, the initiative helps states reform, modernize, and align the systems delivering work support programs intended to increase families’ well-being and stability, particularly the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Block Grant.

The WSS states aimed to improve their processes to deliver benefits to families efficiently and accurately while minimizing burdens on families and workers. States were motivated by the fundamental goal of providing efficient service to the public and by the current economic and policy environments that prompted them to act.

Developing Strategies for Improving Business Processes

States wanted their processes to be more efficient, but first they needed to identify current inefficiencies and determine what processes would be better, all while continuing to serve clients day-to-day. To understand existing processes, and design and implement new ones, the WSS states employed several strategies.

Leadership of Business Process Reengineering Efforts

State WSS teams relied on state staff, diverse workgroups, county social service directors, and external partners to direct business process changes. For example, some states convened dedicated work groups that included not only state staff but also representatives of counties, frontline staff, and community organizations. Each of the WSS states hired business process specialists or contracted with third parties to help offices improve their business processes; some contracted with vendors that specialize in business process changes and provide intensive direction and support; and others hired contract employees to lead, advise, or otherwise assist with business process changes.

Diagnosing Problems through Process Mapping and Other Needs Assessments

Most states' business process changes began by assessing needs and mapping their current processes with significant involvement from county and local office staff. A typical approach involved facilitated workshops in which diverse groups of frontline workers and supervisors literally mapped their current processes using sticky notes. After identifying backlogs and inefficiencies in the current process, participants suggested ways to streamline the process.

Plan-Do-Study-Act, Pilots, and Other Incremental Approaches

After identifying potential process improvements, states usually tested them through a plan-do-study-act approach, small pilots, or other incremental approaches. These approaches allowed states to try out changes in a few offices, or change just one aspect of the process, before deciding whether and how to implement broader changes.

Making Changes to Business Processes

Using various strategies, the WSS states implemented many changes to their business processes. Fundamentally, states changed their expectations for service delivery, including how long it should take to process applications and other transactions, the methods families can use to apply for or renew work supports, and the degree of integration across work support programs. To meet these new expectations, states changed their lobbies, reallocated work across the workforce, and made other changes to streamline and simplify processes.

Expectations for Processing Time and Place

The WSS states fundamentally changed their expectations for what constitutes “timely service.” Rather than merely complying with federal requirements to deliver work supports within 30 days (or another specified time frame), WSS states tried to minimize the time between receiving a client’s application for assistance and when issuing the assistance. Ideally, clients can receive work support benefits on the same day they apply. One Idaho official pointed out that “families don’t care if we met the federal standard ... they care how quickly they have access to benefits.” Nearly all WSS states also expanded the options for clients to apply online or by phone, reducing the need for clients to visit an office in person. In Idaho, recipients can also view their enrollment status and renew their program eligibility online.

Cross-Program Integration

Some WSS states made another fundamental change by integrating business processes across programs. Idaho, Colorado, and Illinois had integrated service delivery processes for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid before the WSS initiative began, although each state further integrated the program processes. Before WSS, Idaho had trained staff to conduct a single interview for both the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid. Rhode Island, South Carolina, and selected counties in North Carolina each established a goal of integrating (at minimum) the intake process for customers seeking assistance for multiple programs—a concept referred to as “no wrong door”—and ultimately having “universal workers” who can process applications and other transactions for multiple programs

Lobby

Many of the changes states made were to improve climate in and customer flow through their lobbies or waiting rooms. The changes included improving the physical appearance of the lobby, changing the lobby layout, introducing lobby management software to track client wait times and needs, and reallocating staff during the day to accommodate client needs.

Allocation of Work

Central to business process changes are changes to the allocation of work across staff and offices to eliminate unnecessary steps and reduce idle time between actions.

- For the most part, the WSS states moved toward a **task-based approach** for eligibility determination and case maintenance. Early in the WSS period, Rhode Island shifted away from assigning child care cases alphabetically; rather, each worker in the small child-care unit handled only certain aspects of cases. Several states developed new consistency tools so workers complete tasks using standardized instructions and resources.
- Closely related to the task-based approach, a **shared caseload model** has workers who handle specific tasks for any client in the caseload. The shared caseload concept can be broadened to include sharing caseloads across individual offices or even throughout the whole state. Some states have also made strategic use of **specialized statewide units** to address temporary needs or as a long-term solution.
- **Universal workers** (or “generic” workers) are workers who are able to handle multiple programs or multiple tasks. In Idaho, local office staff pull work from a statewide queue, and because all staff are trained to be generalists, each person can do a variety of work.
- To keep track of the work as it flows through the process and allocate staff to areas of need, most states use **workflow management software**. In some cases, the same software that assists with the flow of traffic through the lobby also directs the flow of work behind the desk.

Issues States Encountered When Changing Business Processes

The WSS states encountered several obstacles but also employed successful strategies as they implemented many business process changes. This report discusses 12 issues that states encountered and how they navigated them.

Incremental Approaches and Continuous Improvement

The prospect of implementing sweeping business process changes across an entire system can be an exceedingly difficult task. Recognizing this challenge, each of the WSS states implemented at least one business process change incrementally rather than fully enacting change swiftly and broadly.

Incremental approaches to business process changes served as a logistical aid by promoting a better worker experience in a changed landscape and by allowing states to learn and adjust approaches over time.

Alignment with Technology

Because technology systems are intertwined with and inevitably shape how states provide services, a mismatch between a state's vision for service delivery and technology can pose challenges for business process improvements on several fronts. When new business processes do not fully align with existing technology, line workers face difficulty reconciling how they should be doing their job with the tools that facilitate it, making the new processes either inefficient or unsustainable.

Data

Effective data collection and analysis is challenging, but it can be an important facilitator for business process change in states that have both the human and technological capacity to identify, accurately track, understand, and react to new information. Data helped Colorado and Idaho identify where change was needed, set priorities, and monitor progress. On the other hand, Illinois, Rhode Island, North Carolina, and South Carolina all encountered problems defining and accessing meaningful metrics for their business processes, or interpreting the data they did have.

Local Differences and County Control

Local differences within a state, such as in local office or county size, can complicate several steps of the change process. A business process that works well in a large, urban office with thousands of cases and dozens of workers might not work as well in a small, rural office with dozens of cases and only two or three workers. State officials generally worked to strike a balance between encouraging consistency in business processes and allowing for local flexibility.

Time Pressures, Large Workloads, and Temporary Setbacks

The time pressures and large workloads that motivated state human service agencies to take action on business process changes in the first place also encumbered administrators' efforts to actually implement the needed changes, at least temporarily. Some states made a large, one-time push to catch up on work before making certain business process changes. Some states acknowledged that customer service would temporarily worsen as new processes were implemented.

Pilot Office Selection

Piloting business process changes can be useful for experimenting with new processes and making incremental changes, but the choice of where to conduct pilots created challenges for some WSS states. Rhode Island and Illinois each regretted choosing their largest and most challenging offices for pilots because the experiments ended up depleting resources, slowing down the timeline for a statewide rollout, and providing a discouraging example for other offices.

Staff Training on Process and Management

Effective staff training can enhance buy-in and capacity for implementing changes in business processes. Training in some states addressed not only the changing tasks and policies but also the organizational culture standing in the way of better customer service. However, training also presented three significant challenges in business process reengineering (BPR) implementation. First, as states moved toward universal workers handling multiple work support programs, staff needed to be cross-trained on the new work supports, and the scope of information staff needed to know could be overwhelming. Second, training on new programs and new skills needed to occur as staff continued to serve clients daily. Finally, as states moved toward task-based processes, supervisors needed to learn new skills for managing processes, not just people.

Staff and Management Abilities and Willingness to Change

Successful business process changes depend on frontline workers and supervisors for implementation. But sometimes frontline workers and supervisors responded to the changes with mixed emotions and

resistance. The WSS states worked hard to address this challenge through clear communication and engagement with staff at all levels.

Competing Priorities and Goals across Agencies

Integrating service delivery process across the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, child care subsidies, and other programs often required coordination across agencies. The structure of state agencies can lead to challenges, because each agency operates under its own priorities. Federal mandates and legislation can also shift priorities for state agencies. When the Affordable Care Act passed, state Medicaid agencies had the intensive and urgent task of implementing it. But several states realized they could continue working on program integration and use the Affordable Care Act as an opportunity to address access and efficiency in all of its major programs, not just Medicaid.

Commitment and Dedication of Many Actors

The commitment and dedication of people in a range of roles throughout the state were essential for successful business process changes in the WSS states.

- A commitment from both state leaders, as well as local office leaders, facilitated BPR changes in all WSS states, even though obtaining and maintaining commitments was challenging.
- Central workgroups helped promote business process changes by providing structure, timelines, and follow up.
- Using outside vendors brought critical expertise, experience from other states, and an impartial perspective that transcends state history and turf battles. But using an outside vendor also posed some risk that office practices may revert after the vendor leaves, sometimes involves state procurement hurdles, and may rely on a vendor's prescribed methods for changes that do not precisely fit the state's needs.

Communication and Collaboration

Like so many other aspects of making business process changes, communication and collaboration among state and local agencies, stakeholders and unions was simultaneously important and difficult.

CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION

Business process changes depend on collaboration between state health and human service agencies along with many other entities. Positive relationships facilitated business process changes in the WSS states by promoting common understandings, sharing practical tools and ideas, and smoothing the logistics of the changes.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS WITHIN THE STATE

Engagement of staff at all levels facilitates the implementation of business process improvements by engendering buy-in, which in turn leads to cooperation and more efficient implementation of changes. For example, engaging staff in the planning and implementation of changes can foster ownership because staff are able to weigh in and provide input on changes. Meetings with management and staff also provide an avenue for feedback and information about what adjustments need to be made for more effective and efficient implementation.

ENGAGING EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

States relied on external stakeholders not only for input on proposed changes but also for help communicating with customers about process changes.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN UNIONS AND MANAGEMENT

In Illinois and Rhode Island, all line-level workers and supervisors are union members and staff roles are governed by union contracts, so the states needed to consider union rules when assessing potential business process changes. In Rhode Island, direct communication of the agency director with union leadership and involvement of line workers, including union leadership, in the design process helped ease the change process.

Funding

Another factor affecting business process changes is the underlying facilitator or challenge of adequate funding. Limited state resources and insufficient staffing were initial motivators for business process changes in nearly all of the WSS states. As one state observer noted, however, BPR is “immensely helpful but at some point you just need more resources. You can only BPR your way out of the problem so much ... BPR isn’t going to fix everything.” Also important were the WSS grants to states. At around \$250,000 per year, the WSS grants were small relative to state budgets, but these focused, flexible funds greatly facilitated states’ business process change efforts. These funds allowed the states to

dedicate a full-time staff member to managing and coordinating their efforts; support the time of other staff, such as data analysts and business process specialists; and pay for staff training on the new processes. Several states also used the funds to contract with business process vendors.

Monitoring and Measuring Outcomes

The WSS states have been monitoring some of the specific outcomes that can indicate improvements in efficiency. Although the states have different capacities for data collection and analyses, the range of outcomes at least some states are monitoring include increases in percentage of new applications that are processed within federally mandated timeframes, reductions in number of average days between application and benefit availability, increases in same day service delivery, improvements to staff morale, and increases in the number of positive client experiences. Examination of these measures over time in conjunction with the timing of state activities shows some improvement of outcomes after implementation of business changes.

- All of the WSS states that made business process changes saw some improvement in the efficiency of their service delivery, although the overall improvements in processing times for the WSS states mask considerable ups and downs in individual states over the period. The most striking improvements were in the numbers of applicants receiving their benefit determination on the same day that they applied. The four states that tracked same-day service all saw improvements, with dramatic improvements in Colorado, Illinois, and Rhode Island. In contrast, the percentage of cases meeting federal requirements for timeliness did not change consistently.
- Information from client experience surveys paints a picture of overall improved client experiences, despite some lingering issues.
- Staff morale is closely linked to quality of service and client experiences: staff feel better when they perceive that they are better able to do their jobs and help clients. Although many staff initially were skeptical that the new business processes would yield noticeable results, staff across most of the WSS states reported finally experiencing efficiency improvements. But not all staff report improved morale. Some frontline workers and others reported mixed feelings about the shift from case-based to task-based processing, and shortly after implementing business process changes, some expressed frustration and concern that they were not able to help customers as much as was needed, citing both understaffing and insufficient training,

Conclusions

The WSS states approached business process improvements from many starting points and state contexts, and they made different choices about the paths to take, but their varied experiences yielded some consistent lessons. The most fundamental lesson learned from the WSS state experiences is that **making business process changes is possible** in state social service agencies. Three other lessons emerged.

First, making business process improvements is a long, iterative effort, not something that can be quickly implemented and considered complete.

Second, **changing business processes requires trust, collaboration, communication, and leadership** among multiple entities, including state agencies, local or county office leaders, office supervisors, frontline workers, community stakeholders, and unions.

Third, **business processes are inseparable from technology and policy**. How applications and other actions are processed in a social service office depends largely on policies, such as what documentation is required from customers and how quickly an agency is required to process applications and other actions. The process also depends on the computer systems and other technology that help determine an applicant's eligibility and manage ongoing cases.

Introduction

In delivering work supports to low-income families, “business process” refers to how a social service office organizes the work of greeting customers, accepting applications, making eligibility determinations, and all other aspects of helping individuals and families access and retain the supports for which they are eligible. Like other large public and private organizations, social service offices sometimes experience challenges with processes that use outdated technology, create unnecessary burdens, and do not work effectively for staff or families. This report examines the efforts of six states to address this challenge.

In this report, we share evaluation findings from the six states involved in the Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative (box 1) as they tried to streamline and integrate their delivery of work supports, including food assistance, medical assistance, and child care subsidies. For contextual information on the six states, see appendix A, WSS State Context. First, we describe a typical example of the process of applying for assistance to illustrate the burden for families and explain why state social service agencies are motivated to improve the process. Then we examine the states’ strategies for diagnosing process problems and developing solutions, the business process changes states made, the issues states encountered as they changed their business processes, and the effects of the changes on program efficiency and client well-being.

BOX 1

Work Support Strategies

Work Support Strategies (WSS) is a multiyear, multistate, foundation-funded initiative to help low-income families get and keep the package of work supports for which they are eligible. Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Carolina were selected through a competitive process to participate in WSS, first in a planning and design year in 2011 and then in the implementation phase since 2012.

Through grants, expert technical assistance, and peer learning, the initiative helps states reform, modernize, and align the systems delivering work support programs intended to increase families' well-being and stability, particularly the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Through WSS, states seek to streamline and integrate service delivery, use 21st century technology, and apply innovative business processes to improve administrative efficiency and reduce the burden on states and working families, all toward the overall goal of increasing participation and retention to support work and well-being.

Findings from the WSS evaluation are based on analysis of hundreds of individual and group interviews conducted during annual site visits to the six states over the four years of planning and implementation; hundreds of quarterly reports, planning documents, and other written materials submitted by the states; other documents obtained through secondary sources; state administrative data tracking key outcomes over time; and additional data from client experience surveys and client focus groups conducted by the evaluation team in selected states. For additional reports and information, see www.urban.org/work-support-strategies.

What Do Families Experience as They Apply for Work Supports?

Typically, when a family seeks work supports, such as food, medical, or child care assistance, they begin by visiting a social service office during regular business hours. Parents may have taken the day off of work and may have their children with them. As they arrive at the office, they stand in line or take a number and wait to see a caseworker for an interview. Families might be given a paper application to complete or they might answer some or all of the application questions during the interview while the worker enters responses directly into the eligibility system. The application could be 20 pages or more and includes detailed questions about who is in the family, sources of income, household expenses, and other such information. To substantiate what is stated in the application, the family will need to provide

verification documents, such as pay stubs, proof of residence, and expenses such as rent and child care. Unless they know to bring these documents, they probably need to go home (and to their employer and landlord) to obtain these documents, which they mail or bring back to the office on another day.

The first visit to the social service office probably lasts a few hours. If it is a particularly busy day, they might spend the whole day at the office. Once they successfully complete the application and provide all the documentation, the agency determines whether to issue benefits. In some cases, agencies can make a decision right away. But more often, the agency needs to process the information and mail notification of the decision. By law, they should receive this notice within 30 days for food assistance and within 45 days for Medicaid, but some families wait longer. While waiting, especially as time goes on, the family might call the office to try to get information about their status; they may have difficulty reaching a worker, who might not answer the phone or whose voice mail box may be full. After the family begins receiving work supports, they must periodically redetermine their eligibility to continue receiving them through a process similar to the application process.

Although this stereotypical example is not uncommon, it was written to highlight some of the most time-consuming or burdensome procedures families face in accessing benefits. Different states and offices vary for better or worse. In some states, a client can apply for multiple benefits simultaneously; in others, a client must visit a different office and complete a different process for each benefit. Clients may be able to apply online or over the phone instead of visiting the office in person. Offices may scan paper documents, reducing the need for clients to bring multiple copies of documents that do not change over time (e.g., proof of citizenship or immigration status). Offices may also electronically verify some information rather than requiring clients to bring paper documents to the office.

Why Did WSS States Decide to Improve Business Processes?

The WSS states sought to improve their processes to deliver benefits as efficiently and accurately as possible, minimizing burdens on families and workers, so families can access the supports they need. Although the states were motivated by this overall goal of being good public stewards and providing efficient service, additional motivations led them to take action at this time. The economic downturn heightened the pressure on states to serve more families seeking assistance in a workforce that had not kept pace with the growth in demand or, in some cases, a reduced workforce. This pressure also increased some states' challenges in meeting federal targets for accurate and timely service delivery. In addition, the Affordable Care Act and the expansion of Medicaid in some states created additional demands for determining health insurance eligibility but also offered states an attractive, time-limited opportunity to use federal funds (at a 90-to-10 match rate) for new technologies that could change how they did business. Many WSS state leaders thought that their sometimes bureaucratic, paper-heavy, and burdensome processes were unsustainable in the face of falling state tax revenues and increased public demand for assistance. Illinois had both policies that gave many low-income workers access to the supports they needed to keep their jobs and make ends meet and processes that theoretically allowed families to work one-on-one with a dedicated caseworker. In practice, workers were responsible for over 2000 families each, and application interviews were scheduled more than 30 days after the application date, leaving many families without support and leading Illinois staff to call theirs a "completely dysfunctional, broken system."

Before engaging in the WSS initiative, states had begun addressing these issues to varying degrees. Table 1 identifies the initial motivations that the WSS states said in interview and reports led them to improve their business processes.

TABLE 1

What Motivated WSS States to Improve Business Processes?

	Colorado	Idaho	Illinois	North Carolina	Rhode Island	South Carolina
More efficient use of existing resources	X	X	X	X	X	
Alignment with new or updated technology	X	X		X	X	X
Respond to increase in cases (due to ACA, due to recession, etc.)	X	X	X	X	X	
Improve timeliness	X		X	X		X
Reduce burdensome processes	X	X		X	X	X
Respond to insufficient staffing levels (because short on funds)	X	X	X	X	X	
Reduce administrative costs		X			X	X
Improve client experience (physical office; waiting room time)		X	X	X		
Improve staff morale			X	X	X	
Coordinate across programs or implement “No Wrong Door” approach		X		X	X	X
Distribute workload more evenly across staff		X				
Increase program participation	X					
Improve or maintain program integrity		X				

Source: Authors’ analysis of written documents and interviews with states.

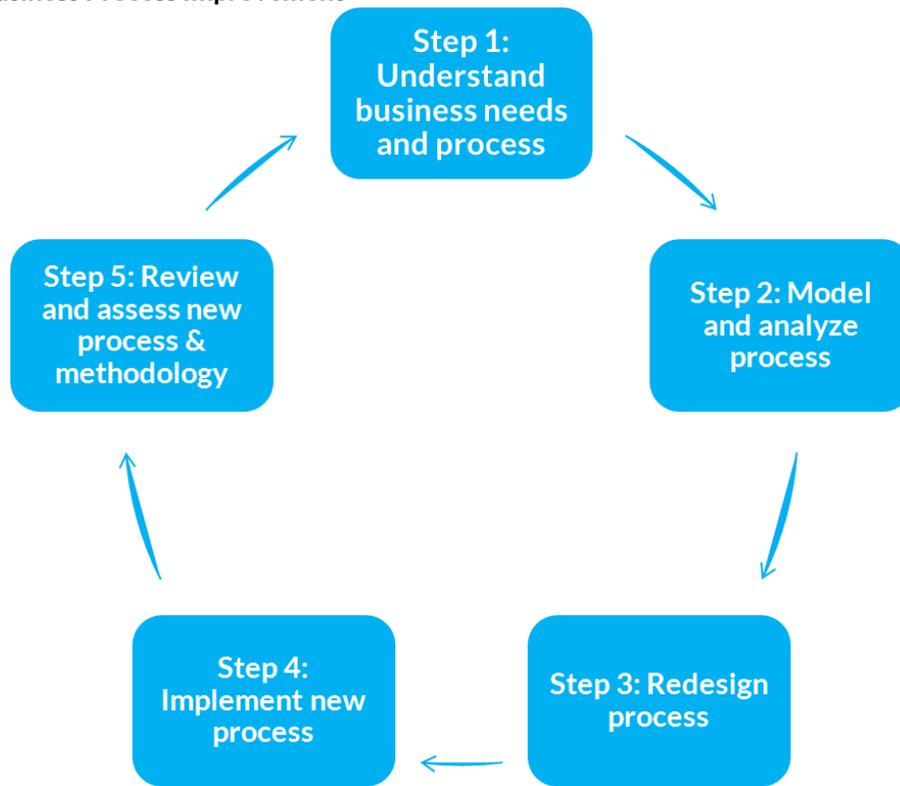
For many of the states, participation in WSS was the catalyst that shifted business process changes from a vague or unrealized plan to a reality. Although the states had broad goals of improving process efficiency, they reported that the WSS initiative contributed to their examining and changing their business processes in concrete ways. The WSS initiative provided participating states with grants, technical assistance, and accountability to a third party. The WSS funding for hiring specialists and managing the project was essential for creating the dedicated staff time to make the changes. In addition, during a kickoff conference for the initiative, WSS team members from each state participated in an interactive work session led by the Southern Institute on Children and Families, in which team members developed an understanding of business process analysis and improvement in the context of social service delivery and designed road maps for performing business process analysis and improvement in their states. The WSS initiative also facilitated peer-learning opportunities, including site visits to other states. Rhode Island WSS team members said of a WSS-facilitated visit to New Mexico, “It was eye opening! We have similar numbers [of clients] but their lobbies were almost empty.” Another said, “Seeing is believing.”

What Is Business Process Reengineering?

“Business process reengineering (BPR) began as a private sector technique to help organizations fundamentally rethink how they do their work in order to dramatically improve customer service, cut operational costs, and become world-class competitors. BPR has since captured the interest of government agencies, which are faced with an urgent need to reduce costs and improve service to the American public” (GAO 1997). The public sector focus on business processes inherently recognizes that the everyday actions of frontline workers and other “street-level bureaucrats” are an essential component of policy implementation (Lipsky 1980). The term “business process reengineering” first appeared in an article by Michael Hammer (1990), and the related term, “business process improvement” was originally coined by James Harrington (1991). Although these popular concepts are only loosely defined, generally business process reengineering refers to a radical change and business process improvement refers to ongoing, incremental changes (Adesola and Baines 2005). Common steps among the approaches include identifying the business needs, understanding and modeling the existing business process, redesigning the process, implementing the new process, and assessing and reviewing the new process.

FIGURE 1

Steps for Business Process Improvement



Source: Urban Institute adaptation based on Adesola and Baines (2005).

How Did the WSS States Develop Strategies for Improving Business Processes?

To understand existing processes and to design and implement new ones, the WSS states employed several strategies. Although some of the WSS states were making business process changes before joining the WSS initiative, they all engaged in additional changes as part of their WSS activities. Several states and offices used process mapping and other needs assessments to understand and model their existing business processes and begin developing new ones. Some offices relied on vendors to provide step-by-step guidance and intensive on-site support. Others employed a “plan-do-study-act” (PDSA) approach to test out new processes. Some also implemented new processes in pilot offices or used other incremental approaches. Idaho notably followed the Agile method to make incremental changes in automation to support business process improvements. We discuss each of these strategies later in this section. Before engaging those strategies, however, states decided who would lead and participate in the business process change efforts.

Who Led the BPR Effort?

Central Work Groups

Each state had a central WSS team, often called a coordinating committee or WSS team, to oversee all WSS-related activities, including business process changes. Some also had subcommittees or work groups dedicated to business process changes. In some states, the committees included not only state staff working directly in the central state agency but also county representatives, frontline staff, and community organizations. In South Carolina, a special work group called the eligibility process improvement collaborative was an early vehicle for the work. Idaho’s WSS team was a subset of a larger management team; business process improvements were typically developed and implemented by the larger management team or a subset of the team focused on operations.

Contractors and External Partners

Each state hired business process specialists or contracted with third parties to help offices improve their business processes. Colorado, South Carolina, and Rhode Island contracted with vendors that specialize in business process changes. Illinois avoided a long state procurement process by instead hiring contract employees to lead business processes improvement efforts and to work closely with local offices throughout the state. Idaho also hired contract employees who analyzed business processes and developed and maintained process documentation. North Carolina partnered with North Carolina State University to train state staff (the Operational Support Team) being deployed to advise counties on business processes. Although the states paid for these experts at least partly with their WSS grants, several states also tapped funding available through the Food and Nutrition Service, the federal agency responsible for SNAP, or state funding sources.

Counties

Counties in Colorado and North Carolina directly administer work support programs under state supervision, so counties played a key role in business process improvement efforts in these two states. In Colorado, the state contracted with three vendors to work with all or a subset of counties, with varying degrees of intensity. Although all counties were touched by regional workshops for business process changes for ACA implementation, the 10 largest counties were offered the opportunity to engage with a vendor on more-intensive business process changes. Although 8 of the 10 accepted the opportunity, they also each chose how fully to implement the vendor's recommended changes. In North Carolina, a central goal was supporting counties in making business process change. To that end, the state provided written resources and workshops for counties and provided technical assistance to counties facing especially large operational challenges. As in Colorado, North Carolina counties decided whether and what business process changes to make.

Diagnosing Problems through Process Mapping and Other Needs Assessments

Whether led by a vendor, contractor, or state staff, most states' business process changes began with needs assessments and mapping of their current processes, with significant involvement from county and local office staff. A typical approach involved facilitated workshops with diverse groups of frontline

workers and supervisors who literally mapped their current processes using sticky notes on conference room walls. During the workshops, the groups identified backlogs and inefficiencies in the current processes. Staff in both Rhode Island and South Carolina who participated in such workshops said they found the exercise eye opening because they identified bottlenecks in processes and developed means to eliminate or reduce them. “We didn’t realize all of the problems everybody had,” one worker said. Figure 2 shows how a South Carolina office mapped the physical office layout, a specialized aspect of process mapping, to identify potential improvements.

In Colorado, the WSS team also mapped the geographic locations of kiosks (dedicated laptop computers in libraries and other organizations that link directly to the state’s online social service application) to assess where people had access throughout the state and the need for relocation.

The Idaho management team reviews performance data regularly to decide on business process improvements. Those data help identify areas of opportunity for improvement and diagnose the steps that contribute to delayed eligibility decisions.

FIGURE 2

South Carolina Office Layout Mapped by Staff



Source: Change and Innovation Agency (2014).

Plan-Do-Study-Act Approach

The PDSA approach often follows directly from process mapping. After identifying backlogs and inefficiencies in the current process, participants suggest ways to streamline the process. The office then employs a PDSA cycle, in which a fully refined idea is tested as a pilot and adjusted as necessary. The PDSA approach says, in the words of a WSS state representative familiar with the process, "Here are some strategies. Try one. How did it work? Go back to the table. Try something else." It is expected that some strategies will succeed and others will fail. After working with a vendor on the PDSA approach, Rhode Island workers in one office were inspired to adopt the PDSA techniques to review

other aspects of their office business processes, even without further technical assistance from the vendor. Reflecting on the experience of using the PDSA approach, a social service director from one of Colorado's counties said, "It did help us get a lot farther than we had been on our own."

BPR Contractor On-Site Support and Software

To take business process change to the next level, some state and county leaders felt they needed more hands-on support. To acquire this, Colorado, Rhode Island, and South Carolina contracted with the Change and Innovation Agency (CIA) to systematically evaluate and recommend business process changes. CIA also introduced process management software, which manages both lobby and nonlobby work. CIA's approach, in the words of a county office manager in Colorado, was to "come in, work with us, decide with us what day we are going to roll," and continue working closely with the office "until [we were] weaned from technical assistance." CIA's extensive involvement in these three states included writing assessment reports, leading two-week design team meetings with many frontline staff and managers, being on site during rollout of the new processes, and holding ongoing conference calls following the rollout. Colorado and Rhode Island also engaged CIA for additional postimplementation reviews to help offices that had trouble sticking with the new ways of doing business after CIA's intensive involvement ended.

Pilots and Other Incremental Approaches

Pilots and other incremental approaches, beyond PDSA, were common strategies for making business process changes.

Pilots helped several states try out changes in a few offices before deciding whether and how to implement the changes statewide. South Carolina conducted two rounds of pilots in Greenville and Anderson counties; the first changed the process of determining eligibility for Medicaid, SNAP, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the second attempted to improve the flow of traffic in the lobby. Further pilots were planned in an additional four counties in 2015. Rhode Island piloted SNAP same-day service and then rolled it out statewide. Illinois used pilots to change from case-based to task-based business processes in three local offices. Lessons from these pilots informed the state's development of a best-practices toolkit for use in other offices but ultimately contributed to the

state decision to not replicate the piloted approach statewide. Idaho implemented its new lobby management and workflow software one region at a time.

Counties in North Carolina and Colorado initiated changes in their offices that served as natural pilots. The North Carolina WSS team saw counties as “test kitchens” for new approaches. North Carolina initially conducted a pilot in two counties to align certification periods for clients’ SNAP and Medicaid benefits to offer an example for other counties. The state was clear that the point was not to get every county to the same benefit administration model but to encourage counties to innovate toward a point where families would tell their story once and get all the services they need. To support counties in that work, the North Carolina WSS team developed a county innovations document (a summary of promising practices from around the state) and a practice model (a tool to help counties set local goals for enhancing operations and customer service) to “aid local agencies in operationalizing the vision for service delivery.” The WSS team also produced a county self-assessment template to help counties evaluate where they stood on the goals suggested in the practice model and identify opportunities for improvement. Similarly, Illinois encouraged its local (albeit state-run) offices to develop their own more-efficient business processes with the help of the best-practices toolkit and a handful of BPR specialists throughout the state. Colorado offered counties WSS-funded innovation grants or mini-grants for testing strategies to improve business process efficiencies. Some of the grants funded lobby kiosks, dual monitors for county workers and customer satisfaction surveys; they also allowed offices to scan existing case files to complement new document imaging systems, provide information about available work supports at Medicaid enrollment fairs. Ten remote counties in northwestern Colorado received a mini-grant to develop and test an innovative, collaborative approach that would allow them to share staff, pool resources, and integrate services; that pilot is ongoing.

In contrast to piloting changes in just a few offices, some states applied incremental business process changes by making just a few changes at a time across many offices, iteratively building to more comprehensive changes. Illinois first repainted offices and installed new signs to improve the atmosphere and morale and then helped individual pilot offices develop new business processes. After a negative experience trying to cross-train all workers in Medicaid and SNAP, several counties in North Carolina started over more slowly, combining only intake (and in some cases express transactions) for the two programs and not yet attempting to combine the two programs’ back-end processing. Colorado’s iterative BPR efforts began before the WSS initiative and have continued in stages. They are led by different state agencies using a variety of vendors, and they move from technical assistance on broad BPR approaches to intensive on-the-ground support in selected counties (as well as other discrete actions to iteratively improve processes). Idaho began their move toward a statewide

workforce (a workforce not exclusively specialized by geography or processing function) with statewide cultural discussions. In these discussions, workers were introduced to the idea of “our work” rather than “my work” and slowly increased how much managers shifted work across units to better balance the workload. Idaho’s approach has long been to make incremental changes, consistent with their use of Lean methodologies, that continuously improve by adapting to a changing business environment and systematically eliminating unnecessary activities or processes. Idaho carefully monitors implementation of new business process improvements and makes adjustments to refine implementation. Idaho state leaders referred to the concept of “failing forward.” They said, “It’s just a constant motion forward [even if we experience some failures]. It’s just expected that we’re going to upgrade, fix, and repair as we learn of defects and things that aren’t so efficient. And then they’ll fix that piece and we’ll move forward.”

What Business Process Changes Did States Make?

Using various strategies, the WSS states implemented many changes to their business processes. Fundamentally, states changed their expectations for service delivery, including how long it should take to process applications and other transactions, the methods families can use to apply for or renew work supports, and the degree of integration across work support programs. To meet these new expectations, states changed their lobbies, reallocated work across the workforce, and streamlined and simplified processes.

Expectations for Processing Time and Place

The WSS states fundamentally changed their expectations for what constitutes “timely service.” Rather than merely complying with federal requirements to deliver work supports within 30 days (or another specified time frame), WSS states tried to minimize the time between receiving a client’s application for assistance and when issuing the assistance. “Families don’t care if we met the federal standard ... they care how quickly they have access to benefits,” an Idaho official pointed out. “One and done” became a mantra in many state offices as workers tried to minimize the number of times a case was touched by a worker and the number of times each client needed to interact with the office before an eligibility decision was made.

Ideally, clients can receive work support benefits on the same day they apply. The goal of the business process redesign in many offices was “same-day service”: seeing clients as they come into the office and reaching a decision before they leave, rather than seeing a client, receiving their paperwork, and sending a response later. “We used to just have them drop off [documents] and leave,” a South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) administrator said. “Now when a client wants to apply we are asking them to stay to see a caseworker. We want to process that case when they are in the office.”

Rhode Island piloted same-day service for SNAP applicants, moving away from the traditional process in which applicants came to the office to fill out paperwork and scheduled a time to return for an interview before receiving benefits. In the pilot, at least one SNAP worker was dedicated to processing SNAP cases right away so that applicants could enroll and leave with an electronic benefit

transfer (EBT) card (essentially a debit card for accessing their SNAP benefits) with their first visit. “The first client ... was like, ‘This is amazing,’” a SNAP line manager from Providence said. “People tell clients you have to wait weeks for benefits and he walked out the same day with an EBT card.” In focus group interviews in summer 2015, Rhode Island clients also expressed appreciation and surprise that they were getting same-day service. After starting same-day service with SNAP, Rhode Island expanded it to TANF. They found the approach harder to implement and possibly less appropriate for TANF because TANF clients need to see two different workers to determine eligibility and develop an employment plan.

Nearly all WSS states also expanded the options for clients to apply online, reducing the need for clients to visit an office in person. In Idaho, recipients can also view their enrollment status and renew their program eligibility online. As an Idaho state official said, “Most people really don't want to spend their day in the health and welfare office. I do believe a lot of people do want to be out there working or looking for work, and a lot of our customers are working, so it's a matter of taking time off [of work] to come in if they need to communicate.”

Cross-Program Integration

Some WSS states made another fundamental change by integrating business processes across programs. An Idaho official said, “Program integration was a cornerstone of what we’ve done.” Idaho, Colorado and Illinois had integrated service delivery processes for SNAP and Medicaid before the WSS initiative began, although both further integrated their processes. Before WSS, Idaho had trained staff to conduct a single interview for both SNAP and Medicaid. Despite initial concerns that the combined interview would be too long, after an adjustment period the combined interview was taking only minutes longer than the original for a single program. Colorado began providing integrated training across programs rather than providing separate training on each program. Illinois began integrating the processes related to child care assistance with those for SNAP and Medicaid, even though child care assistance is administered by private entities. According to an internal Illinois WSS report, the state developed a liaison list that “provides both sectors with key contact information to be able to communicate and address issues with each other directly, as opposed to using the customer as an intermediary. This is a simple but important step to improving communication and collaboration across these two entities.”

Rhode Island, South Carolina, and selected counties in North Carolina each established a goal of integrating (at minimum) the intake process for customers seeking assistance for multiple programs (a concept referred to as “no wrong door”) and ultimately having “universal workers” who can process applications and other transactions for multiple programs. In South Carolina, where separate agencies administer Medicaid and SNAP, the no-wrong-door approach aims to connect citizens to all relevant programs through a unified lobby environment that better aligns the frontline client experience for each program and reduces the need for clients to repeat their stories to multiple workers. In this model, navigators in the county offices assess each applicant’s need for the full range of services and triage applicants to the appropriate window for further service. South Carolina and North Carolina each piloted integrated intake processes in two counties, and South Carolina held kickoff meetings to provide staff and supervisors with an overview of the no-wrong-door business process.

Lobby

Many of the changes states made were to improve climate in and customer flow through their lobbies or waiting rooms. The changes included improving the physical appearance of the lobby, changing the lobby layout, and introducing lobby management software.

Improving the physical appearance of the lobby was a critical first step for many states. Illinois, before tackling more extensive business process changes, made the offices more inviting and improved worker morale by cleaning and repainting offices through the “Local Office PRIDE” initiative. Both Rhode Island and Idaho drastically altered lobby signage and the overall design of the public areas of some offices, both to ease access for clients and to create a more welcoming environment. Similarly, some North Carolina counties and the two South Carolina pilots experimented with changes to the physical layout of the lobby to reduce congestion. Some offices also added drop boxes to allow clients to drop off documents without waiting in line.

Offices made many other changes intended to more efficiently direct customers through the lobby. Several established or changed the scope of what was handled at a lobby front desk. In some states, the person at the front desk directs families to the right place to receive services. Offices in Rhode Island, the pilot counties of South Carolina, and individual counties in Colorado and North Carolina changed the staffing of their front desks to include more experienced eligibility technicians, allowing them to process some applications or handle simple transactions immediately. Similarly, Idaho reorganized several lobbies, including their largest, to include private front counter space for quick interviews and

transactions; small private offices where clients could have phone interviews when local office staff were too busy; and special counters dedicated to handling express transactions (e.g., dropping off paperwork or reporting an address change).

Several states and offices used computer software to help manage lobby traffic. Idaho now uses the QFlow lobby management system to queue cases in the order that they are received, assign tasks to workers, track both lobby and processing tasks, monitor customer volume, and track customer wait time. An Idaho representative said, “Before [introducing QFlow] we managed office traffic with a shared spreadsheet. When 30 people [were] trying to use it, it would lock up. A spreadsheet was not designed for that (kind of use). QFlow was an absolute blessing. Our customers love it. Lobbies are calm because everyone is listening for their number. Our wait times have dropped just because of the increased efficiency.” Other states, including Rhode Island, South Carolina, and individual counties in Colorado, managed their lobby traffic with CIA’s Pathos software or with similar software developed in house. These software systems allow staff to track client wait times and needs and to reallocate staff during the day as necessary.

States face a challenge in balancing the goals of reduced wait times in lobbies and reduced time between when a client applies for and receives assistance. In the face of this challenge, states have taken different approaches to the priority they give to people waiting in the lobby. Larimer County, Colorado, does not prioritize the applications of the people appearing in person in the office; rather, they treat in-person, mailed, and online applications equally. The county also gives people waiting in the lobby the option to wait or come back, although people understand that if they wait in the lobby, they will have same-day eligibility determination. A county representative explained, “We were sacrificing people who had mailed in their applications, so what we really tried to do is equalize our access points.” Similarly, Denver, Colorado, does not routinely prioritize the applications of people waiting in the lobby, but if the lobby becomes crowded, the office temporarily institutes a “blitz,” during which all staff immediately focus on serving the clients waiting in the lobby before returning to applications received through other means. In contrast, clients in South Carolina and Rhode Island lobbies have their applications prioritized over applications of people who are not physically present. In Pawtucket, Rhode Island, workers processing mailed or online applications are pulled to the lobby if the lines get too long or if it looks like the lobby will not be cleared by the time the office closes. Workers worried that this was counter-productive because it led to more clients coming into the office instead of doing business by mail or online.

Allocation of Work

Central to business process changes are changes to the allocation of work across staff and offices. These business process changes are designed to eliminate unnecessary steps and reduce idle time between actions. Business processes in social service offices generally are case-based, task-based, or a hybrid of the two. Business processes also generally involve either program-specific workers or universal/generic workers. The WSS states generally moved toward task-based processes and universal workers.

In a true case-based approach, an individual caseworker works one-on-one with a family over time to handle all aspects of service delivery, from the initial application to periodic updates on their financial situation. A family has someone focused on their individual case, but if the caseworker is sick, takes vacation, or is busy handling her or his other cases, no action is taken on the case until the worker can turn to it again. Case-based allocation of work has been the norm in social services offices in recent decades, reflecting social work's orientation toward developing personal connections with client families and the logistical reality that when case information was all in paper files, it was efficient for a case file to stay with one worker. Although the ideal case-based approach allows for personal connections between caseworkers and families, workers in some states have been responsible for as many as 2000 cases, making a personal connection all but impossible. In addition, high rates of turnover among staff and the need to balance workload across staff have meant that cases are often still reassigned to different workers.

In contrast, a task-based approach organizes workers by function (such as accepting applications, processing applications and renewals, processing case changes) and tasks associated with cases that need action are pushed out to workers through a priority queue. Modern electronic files make the task-based approach possible. The task-based approach could lead to a less personal experience, but it tends to address a family's needs more quickly.

Another business processes choice agencies have to make is between program-specific workers and universal or generic workers. A program-specific worker focuses only on one social service program, such as food or medical assistance. A universal or generic worker handles both food and medical assistance and possibly other programs. The choice to have universal workers may gain efficiencies by working all programs for which a family applied, but it can require a worker to know the many different rules across programs. Both case-based and task-based approaches can have either program-specific or universal workers.

In practice, the WSS states' business processes for delivering work supports typically combined multiple approaches, and some used different approaches for different aspects of service delivery. For example, universal workers might handle the intake of new applications for all programs while program-specific workers determine eligibility separately for each program, or a single statewide unit might handle certain aspects of the process; meanwhile, cash assistance applicants might be assigned an individual caseworker who handles all aspects of their case. The WSS states found that specialization tended to be efficient in programs (or subsets of programs) with more complicated requirements, such as TANF, and long-term medical care, or for discrete, complex tasks.

In this section we offer examples of how the WSS states have used these concepts in their business process changes, as well as how they used workflow management software and other technology.

Task-Based Case Processing

For the most part, the WSS states moved toward a task-based approach for eligibility determination and case maintenance. Early in the WSS period, Rhode Island shifted away from assigning child care cases alphabetically; rather, each worker in the small child care unit handled only certain aspects of cases. In 2015, Rhode Island made a larger switch to a task-based case management system for Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and child care; however, some types of Rhode Island's more complex Medicaid cases are still assigned to individual workers. One Colorado county restructured its SNAP work into a task-based model; another county moved only the staff handling ongoing cases to a task-based model; and yet another Colorado county redesigned its office as an almost entirely task-based model, with dedicated task teams handling application intake, application processing, redetermination processing, and changes in cases. One Illinois office reported that they assign staff to conduct interviews both for new applicants (intake) and for ongoing cases (service coordination): "We're trying to really do away with the division between intake and service coordination, not in the tasks themselves but when it comes to the teams, to worker responsibility. We don't say, you're an intake worker, you're a service worker. We say, you're an interviewer. We have people who do intake interviews, and [when] they run out of intake interviews, they start on service coordination interviews."

Changes included not only switching from case-based to task-based processing but also restructuring tasks or implementing tools to further improve task-based processes. An Idaho representative said, "We have always been fine tuning and improving how interviews flow and [how] the structure goes." Process engineers in Idaho produce release notes and other documentation to ensure consistent, effective implementation of new processes. Several states, including South Carolina

and Rhode Island, developed new consistency tools so workers are completing tasks using standardized instructions and resources.

Shared Caseloads and Specialized Statewide Units

The concept of a shared caseload is closely related to the task-based model: workers who handle specific tasks for any client in the caseload are sharing the caseload. The shared caseload concept can be broadened to include sharing caseloads across individual offices or even throughout the whole state. Ten counties in northwestern Colorado created a collaborative through which rural offices receive processing assistance and training, either remotely or in person, from a shared staff member based in the largest of these counties. Illinois used shared caseloads to help individual offices work through a backlog of cases more quickly.

Idaho has taken the shared caseload concept the farthest, moving toward a universally shared caseload throughout the state. An Idaho state official explained:

[The] concept is you first start with your office, then your region and expand statewide if you need to. ... People can just go in and pull work ... People from region 1 can pull [work] from region 3 if (region 3 is) swamped ... The concept of having a universal worker makes us more flexible and dynamic.

Idaho turned to this statewide workforce model when they faced the prospect of reducing staff in smaller offices and moving those positions to another part of the state. The statewide workforce solution prevented the need to move positions, allowing staff in smaller offices to handle the state's given workload from where they were. An Idaho office manager explained that trust and honest communication about capacity and resource needs were critical for implementing the universal shared caseload. She said, "It's about communication, about the managers—everyone—being really honest about problems we are having or what ... help is needed. It took time for us to develop that trust and communication."

Some states have also made strategic use of specialized statewide units to address temporary needs or as a long-term solution. South Carolina's Department of Social Services uses a unique "regional specialized workflow" model in which each region of the state handles a specific aspect of the work for the entire state; SNAP intake interviews are primarily conducted through a call-in center operated by one region rather than in each local office. This model was under development prior to the WSS grant and has undergone some revision over the past several years. Illinois established a centralized call center to take applications by phone, although customers can still apply in person at a local office. Idaho

has a centralized mail unit and call center. Rhode Island experimented with a centralized statewide SNAP office, which handled all recertifications of SNAP eligibility for current recipients, to address problems with SNAP workloads and error rates.

Universal Workers

Universal workers (or generic workers) are workers who can handle multiple programs or multiple tasks. Idaho's efforts to shift to a universal workforce began early in the WSS planning year and go hand-in-hand with its shared caseload, or statewide workforce, model. Rather than being assigned to either SNAP or Medicaid or assigned to handle only walk-in traffic, self-reliance specialists in local offices are expected to handle a range of statewide work (with some exceptions, such as a few specialized workers who handle nursing home eligibility). As needed, local office staff pull work from the statewide queue, and because all staff are trained to be generalists, each person can do a variety of work.

Rhode Island state officials said the universal worker concept was the logical approach in light of the other changes happening in service delivery. "With ACA, policy alignment, the new eligibility system, task-based [business process management]—the silos will go down, [and not transitioning to a universal worker system] simply won't make any sense." Rhode Island Department of Human Services leadership, in partnership with the union, ended the department's decades-old practice of having eligibility technicians work only one work support program (potentially the only program the worker was familiar with for her or his entire career) and in July 2014 rolled out a new approach using teams of workers, some of whom handle eligibility or recertification functions across two or three programs.

North Carolina is still refining its vision for an alternative to program-specialized eligibility workers. Counties have implemented a universal workforce concept to varying degrees. Many counties have a single worker conduct an intake interview for families seeking both SNAP and Medicaid, but have specialized processing units to determine eligibility separately for each program. One county director reported, "In our county, we are talking about universally being able to do [different kinds of] work." A county worker said, "Some of us are still doing program specific stuff. Our supervisors have worked with us to do different schedules and such, but we know that one day it will be more universal." In another North Carolina county that moved to a task-based universal worker model, the director said they were considering returning to a case-based model in which cases are assigned based on the client's last name but workers will process eligibility for more than one benefit program. "If we do that, they will still be universal, but before where they had A-B Medicaid, now they will have A-G [Medicaid and Food]." She

explained, “One thing missing is that ‘you are my worker’ concept... work is getting lost or a client sees three people and if they don’t communicate, I think that is the biggest area of frustration. [We are] thinking of going back to where we were before [so] clients know who they need to contact.”

Workflow Management Software and Alignment with Other Technology

To keep track of the work as it flows through the process and to allocate staff to areas of need, most states use workflow management software. In some cases, the same software that assists lobby traffic management also directs workflow behind the desk. Idaho’s QFlow facilitates the sharing of in-office work throughout the state. Some WSS states and counties use CIA’s Pathos software, which produces real time processing data to help track the progress of an application and how long workers spend on each aspect of the case.

Workflow can depend not only on software designed to distribute and track it but also on the overall eligibility and benefits information technology systems that determine eligibility. In Idaho, new intake work is largely managed through QFlow; ongoing case maintenance and work generated through phone and online interactions with customers is managed through their Integrated Benefit Eligibility System. Rhode Island did not originally include a workflow management system in the technical requirements for their new 90 percent-funded eligibility systems, so they relied on a separate lobby management system when they rolled out their business process changes. After a WSS site visit to New Mexico, where they learned that their new system vendor had a workflow module available, they negotiated to add this functionality to their integrated eligibility system. In the meantime, having two separate systems has been cumbersome, requiring workers to view cases and enter data in more than one place.

As WSS states changed their business processes, they recognized that the business process must align well with the state’s technology. In Illinois, state-run local offices historically have determined their own business processes, but a new automated eligibility system necessitated a standardized task-based business process throughout the state. In contrast, North Carolina’s automated eligibility system, NC FAST, hindered the state’s effort to integrate Medicaid and SNAP casework. Although NC FAST was conceived to support a universal workforce, the system’s structure and rollout impeded progress because the system still requires workers making eligibility determinations to move through one set of screens for SNAP and a different set of screens for Medicaid, and it requires workers to have extensive, detailed knowledge about each program to use the system effectively. Consequently, the state backed away from its initial plan of encouraging counties to move toward a single worker processing eligibility

for both Medicaid and SNAP. As mentioned, although it does not facilitate joint processing of eligibility, NC FAST does facilitate a single intake process, and counties are increasing their use of joint intake for Medicaid and SNAP.

Other Changes to Streamline and Simplify Processes

In addition to the direct changes states made to their business processes in their lobbies and workflow, states made other changes to streamline and simplify processes, including reducing the amount of work flowing through lobbies and offices. Some WSS states moved to electronic documents instead of paper files, provided online applications, verified employment and immigration status through national databases, used data from one program to determine eligibility for another program, reduced the length of applications, and combined notifications and redetermination dates across programs. All of these actions were intended to reduce the burden on staff and clients.

Standardization of Business Processes

Some WSS states wrestled with how much to standardize business processes throughout the state. In spring 2013, Illinois had “84 offices [and] 85 different ways of doing business,” according to a member of the state WSS team. Initially, the state gently pushed its local offices to adopt best practices in their own ways, recognizing “There’s value in some diversity and there is value in some flexibility.” The state abruptly changed its approach in spring 2014, however, after it became apparent that the diverse business processes created undue complications for designing a new integrated eligibility computer system that would work seamlessly in all offices. By November 2014, Illinois had moved to a statewide standardized task-based intake procedure.

In Colorado, where counties have considerable legal and financial autonomy to administer work supports, the state agencies have worked hard to heal enmity and respect county independence. Simultaneously, the state offered counties the assistance of third-party vendors who specialize in business process improvements. Because the same vendor worked with 8 of the 10 largest counties in the state and a second vendor worked to some extent with nearly all of the counties, the counties are now the “closest they have ever been to having similar business processes without the state having to tell them,” according to a state official. A degree of standardization in Colorado is also facilitated by a single benefits management system throughout the state and standardized statewide policy training.

Although the state lacks authority or significant leverage over business processes in the counties, the state is held accountable for meeting federal program performance measures, so it is eager to ensure that counties are using practices that yield timely and accurate service delivery.

At the two extremes of standardization, Idaho has an entirely standardized system statewide, while North Carolina has embraced the idea that they can achieve a standard service delivery outcome through the use of different models. One North Carolina official explained, “At end of day, [North Carolina will] have 100 counties where people are telling their story once, knowing that universal workers and intake will all look different in every county.”

State cultures and the expectations of county-administered versus state-administered systems may also play a role in standardization. Idaho could not achieve their universal workforce goals without standardized processes across the state. Illinois state officials said they realized that some local office administrators did not want the responsibility of designing their own business processes and were relieved to get more specific direction. One state official said, “There also seemed to be less of a desire on the part of offices to develop processes [than we anticipated]. We started with the idea that we were trying to get staff buy-in and we found that it wasn’t wanted or appreciated; they were very open to being told what worked.” When Colorado state and county representatives were asked if the Illinois experience resonated with them, one state official responded, “They don’t live in the Wild West.” The other Coloradans echoed that county autonomy is a strongly held value in Colorado.

What Issues Did States Encounter When Changing Business Processes?

Making business process changes can be extremely challenging. The WSS states encountered several obstacles but also employed successful strategies as they implemented many business process changes. Detailed below are a dozen issues states encountered and how they navigated them.

Incremental Approaches and Continuous Improvement

The prospect of implementing sweeping business process changes across an entire system can be an unpalatable or exceedingly difficult task for agency leadership, local administrators, frontline workers, and customers. Recognizing this challenge, each of the WSS states implemented at least one business process change incrementally rather than fully enacting change swiftly and broadly. The willingness of state leaders to approach business process improvements incrementally suggests that these changes are part of a longer, iterative effort of learning and continuous improvement. Incremental approaches to business process changes served as a logistical aid by promoting a better worker experience in a changed landscape and by allowing states to learn and adjust approaches over time.

An incremental approach provided an opportunity to identify and install fixes. Rhode Island staggered its rollout of a statewide recertification unit for SNAP cases; one administrator said this implementation allowed workers to troubleshoot shortcomings and more thoughtfully introduce the new process in the next office. In Idaho, a state that began business process changes in 2008 and has consistently adopted an incremental approach to continuous improvement, small changes are considered important for minimizing risk. “The way we do our development, we do it in small lifts,” one senior administrator said. “We don’t do big bangs so that way if we have to tweak something, it’s just that little piece that needs to be adjusted. We know it won’t ripple out and tear up the existing structure out there. We know that the flaw is not going to be so broad that it brings us to our knees.” Also in Idaho, an iterative approach, such as beginning implementation of the state’s new self-service web portal Idalink with a “view benefits” feature and then adding a SNAP redetermination feature, helped get the ball rolling and provided the state with valuable information to inform development of additional features, such as online Medicaid applications to comply with ACA requirements. An incremental

approach can also avoid the need to walk back changes that are not working; instead, it's better to take things slower to begin with, a North Carolina county administrator said.

An incremental approach can also help workers better adapt to changes. Colorado first introduced business process changes in its largest counties through PDSA exercises and later contracted with CIA to work more intensively with these counties to continue their business process reengineering. In the second year of Illinois's business process changes, core members of the state's WSS team said they recognized a need to avoid change fatigue among the workers and consequently were not forcefully pushing additional process or workflow changes. One reason for Rhode Island's strategy of rolling out its statewide SNAP recertification unit one office at a time was to ensure the department had enough employees positioned to run everything smoothly.

Nonetheless, a completely incremental approach is not always states' preferred way to change business processes. At times, WSS states found it advantageous to "flip the switch" to a single new process to avoid having two competing simultaneous processes. For example, although Idaho implemented QFlow gradually across the state, the process changed overnight in their largest office. Similarly, when Idaho implemented a new process related to Medicaid eligibility determination, they switched to the new process statewide overnight on December 31. In these cases, careful planning, training, and monitoring and adjustments in the first hours, days, or weeks of implementation are essential. Idaho made these overnight changes in the context of their continuous improvement perspective and did not intend them to be a one-time fix.

Alignment with Technology

Because technology systems are intertwined with and inevitably shape how states provide services, a mismatch between a state's vision for service delivery and technology can pose challenges for business process improvements on several fronts. When new business processes do not fully align with existing technology, line workers face difficulty reconciling how they should be doing their job with the tools that facilitate it, making the new processes either inefficient or unsustainable. Rhode Island faced this problem setting up its statewide recertification unit for SNAP cases before the offices secured scanning technology and went paperless: field office workers weren't able to share paper files with the central unit, and workers in the new unit had to manually book recertifications, sometimes 7,000 cases a month.

Similarly, new technology that does not support existing business processes or desired improvements can hamper or halt workers, even if the processes are organized efficiently. North Carolina's automated eligibility system, which was designed to support more integrated processing across programs, ultimately did not support the task-based model that the state highlighted as a best practice, leading the state to back away from its strong encouragement of counties to adopt task-based processes. "The idea of universal worker is great, but the system didn't match [the new process]," one administrator said.

In Illinois, the state's new eligibility system created chaos for its new business processes. In Illinois, individual local offices were developing new business processes at the same time that the state was preparing to implement a new integrated eligibility system. The state worked closely with each office to ensure that their business process changes would align with the new eligibility system. Despite the attempts to align business processes and technology, a state WSS leader said that when the state switched to the new system on October 1, 2013, "We learned pretty quickly that all the business process instruction we had reviewed didn't apply. And chaos reigned." State WSS leaders also realized that with a different business process in each local office, "our system had to have the flexibility to accommodate 80 different ways of doing work. And what that necessitates is very complex ways of setting up work" in the eligibility system. Ultimately Illinois merged all individual office BPR in to one cohesive plan that aligned with the capabilities of the integrated eligibility system.

Data

Effective data collection and analysis is challenging, but it can be an important facilitator for business process change. In Colorado and Idaho, which both pride themselves on a data culture, data facilitated business process change by helping develop momentum for change and by maintaining that momentum. In these states, data were both quantitative, such as timeliness, wait times, backlog, and other metrics either produced by technological systems or manually compiled by workers, and qualitative, such as interviews of clients in offices.

Data helped develop momentum for BPR in Colorado by highlighting where change was needed. Since 2012, the Colorado Department of Human Services has held monthly C-Stat data review meetings with each division in the department to identify positive trends and opportunities for improvement. "Divisions determine strategies for improvement and implement these strategies, while Executive Leadership help to reduce barriers to the Divisions' success," says the C-Stat website.

Describing how data influenced BPR decisions, one state respondent explained, “They’ll look at [data] by program and month to month changes and changes over time and [executive leadership] will ask questions. They’ll try to dig into what’s going on.” Another state official said, “We show [each county] through C-Stat how they are doing compared to everyone else. After a while you have to wonder how so-and-so is maintaining 90 percent while your numbers are fluctuating; you have to ask what they are doing. It’s peer pressure.”

Office and county assessments brought the need for business process redesign to the fore, building a case for devoting resources to change. Outcomes assessments made a strong case for change in Idaho. An Idaho official said, “We also use data in the back end ... to be able to say how many families are ... retaining their benefits and not [experiencing] that gap in benefits.” Using data at the beginning of the process of change helped set priorities; for overwhelmed departments, as one Idaho worker explained, the question is always “I can’t do everything—what’s the priority?” Data helped state leaders answer that question and decide which BPR efforts to implement.

Once momentum for BPR change was established through data, continuous measurement also helped sustain momentum for change at both a state and office level. A Colorado state-level respondent said early in the BPR process, “For months now [timeliness data has been flat], but we really expect this to improve once the BPR process starts... So [executive leadership] has been paying attention [to counties making BPR changes] and asking questions to see if the numbers are changing ... They’ll be asking questions about ... if they go up and if not then why.” Data also proved crucial for daily implementation of certain kinds of business process changes in county offices. In Colorado, offices reported using data “to see where we need to put staff for the day.” In Idaho, broader measures were used to make frequent adjustments to business processes, resources, and priorities, with one official reporting “I think we look at that data, some of it every single day, some weekly, some monthly, and I think it helps us show what adjustments need to be made.” In this way, problems in new processes or process implementation can be identified and stopped before “the problem just snowballs.” This helps officials, workers, and clients not become too discouraged if a new process does not work or seems difficult. Such frequent adjustments also can prevent backlogs in case processing from becoming unmanageable. Further, such data monitoring allows offices and officials to celebrate BPR successes; polling clients in Colorado, for instance, highlighted how pleased many clients were with the speed of office service after changes were made.

On the other hand, Illinois, Rhode Island, North Carolina, and South Carolina all encountered problems defining and accessing meaningful metrics for their business processes or interpreting the data they did have; consequently, those states did not credit data with helping them move forward in

BPR. In Illinois, the transition from a legacy computer system to the new integrated eligibility system temporarily reduced the number of available metrics. Similarly in Rhode Island, technological transition made data monitoring more difficult. North Carolina reported working on improving the accuracy of its data systems and building reports in NC FAST; South Carolina reported working with a vendor to identify useful data measures.

Beyond the challenge of collecting and accessing the data, is understanding and interpreting the data. Although Idaho and Colorado invested in data analysts and developed structures for systematically and routinely reviewing the data, the other states did not do so to the same extent. Data can be an important facilitator for business process redesign, but only when a state has both the human and technological capacity to identify, accurately track, understand, and react to it.

Local Differences and County Control

Local differences within a state, such as in local office or county size, can complicate several steps of the change process. A business process that works well in a large, urban office with thousands of cases and dozens of workers might not work as well in a small, rural office with dozens of cases and only two or three workers. “You would be surprised [at] the number of counties that have 10 staff [in total,]” said a senior program administrator in Colorado. “It’s different when you have 4 eligibility workers versus 82.” This sentiment was echoed in Rhode Island, where some offices only have one or two workers on a program. To mitigate county size differences, Colorado has started grouping counties by size so similarly sized counties can share practices. Because of possible resource gaps, inviting counties or localities of different sizes to assess any changes can also mitigate the challenge of local differences. Counties may also differ in their starting places, such as in what local managers have already attempted or considered, and moving forward with business process changes that are relatively basic can turn off enthusiasm in places that already have momentum, a Colorado administrator said. Similarly, some local offices might not have as urgent a need to embrace business process changes; respondents in Illinois and Rhode Island observed that such a lack of need can foster resistance or create confusion about why change is needed. State officials generally worked to both encourage consistency in business process and allow for local flexibility.

In county-administered states, the challenges are heightened. In Colorado and North Carolina, county funds support administrative costs, and local elected officials must approve budgets that include these costs, so counties have a vested interest both in efficiency and in ensuring that business processes

are tailored to local circumstances. State staff in Colorado explained, “It’s just about figuring out how counties can retain their uniqueness but still standardize ... across counties and definitely within.” In both Colorado and North Carolina, state social service agencies have encouraged county-level pilots and offered best practices toolkits and other assistance, such as third-party support and expertise, to guide counties as they make their decisions. However, BPR decisions were ultimately up to the counties.

Time Pressures, Large Workloads, and Temporary Setbacks

The time pressures and large workloads that motivated state human service agencies to take action on business process changes in the first place also encumbered administrators’ efforts to actually implement the needed changes, at least temporarily. In Idaho, administrators needed to make a large, one-time push to catch up on work before making certain business process changes. Similarly, members of Rhode Island’s core WSS team said they had to tackle at least part of a 10,000-case backlog before the initial rollout of its transition to task-based processing and a universal workforce. The additional demands of the ACA and Medicaid expansion in some states amplified demands for determining health insurance eligibility at the expense of other efforts. Rhode Island administrators described sometimes getting bogged down with the department’s WSS work in response to health care reform. Further, core members of the state team were stretched thin, sometimes causing delays in other efforts, such as field office redesigns. In North Carolina, a great deal of BPR was delayed as counties struggled through backlogs that accumulated as NC FAST was rolled out for SNAP in 2012 and 2013 and then for Medicaid in 2013 and 2014. Although these challenges did not prevent business process changes from occurring, they slowed, delayed, or otherwise hampered their implementation.

Further, business process changes can temporarily increase time pressures or workload; states need to somehow continue providing services while changing how they do business. A manager in one Colorado county said that her office needed to temporarily stop monitoring wait times while it worked through its business process changes. “At one point we had some people waiting three hours in our lobby, but we had to work through the process,” she said. Union officials in Rhode Island worried that learning a new process would increase pressure on workers who were already overworked: “I don’t want my [union] members to end up like Lucile Ball and Ethel Mertz in the chocolate factory eating the chocolates on the conveyer belt ... That’s how fearful I am with this system. I don’t want members to have nervous breakdowns with the pressure they’re under.” A South Carolina state team member said

that when the state first implemented its regional specialized workflow model, “it was a nightmare. There were things that happened that we didn’t anticipate. The phone provider didn’t have capabilities to field the calls, [and there were] more calls than anticipated. After two months stuff started to level out. I think the clients have gotten more used to it, but [there are] still issues. We [need to]... get the clients access to us quicker and not be on hold for 50 minutes.”

Pilot Office Selection

Piloting business process changes can be useful for experimenting with new processes and making incremental changes, but the choice of where to conduct pilots created challenges for some WSS states. Rhode Island and Illinois each chose their largest and most challenging offices for pilots, which ultimately depleted resources, slowed down a statewide rollout, and provided a discouraging example for other offices. Illinois first piloted and incrementally rolled out business process changes in larger offices—those in crisis mode—believing these offices could benefit most. But starting with these large challenges turned out to be very difficult. As a result of the challenges encountered in the first few offices, Illinois shifted its focus to offices that would prove less challenging and show more-decisive results. Rhode Island officials also regretted starting with their largest office. Rhode Island officials reported that staff were inadequately prepared and trained for the new process in the first office because of the very short time between the announcement and implementation of the changes. Although subsequent offices used a revised training procedure, news of the initial negative experiences may have created unnecessary anxiety among workers and heightened the implementation challenges.

Staff Training on Process and Management

Staff training was a critical component of implementing business process changes in the WSS states. By its very nature, changing business processes involved training staff in the new processes. Some states used training to address not only the changing tasks and policies but also the organizational culture standing in the way of better customer service. The WSS states’ experiences with training staff and supervisors on new business processes not only offer some positive examples but also highlight its inherent challenges.

In some states, such as Illinois and Idaho, respondents emphasized the importance of training staff to generate buy-in and capacity for implementing business process changes. In Illinois, training sessions

on standardized procedures, electronic verification, and other systems created excitement for change; “verification-palooza,” for instance, encouraged the use of electronic document verification and was cited by staff as a fun and engaging way to train on the new verification methods. In Idaho, state-of-the-art video training sessions helped staff learn new processes incrementally and clarified the overall vision for BPR. Idaho’s training approach included post-training tests for workers to demonstrate their learning; the statewide training team used post-test results to identify aspects of the curriculum that needed to be improved, and supervisors in local offices used post-test results to deliver targeted support to individuals. In addition, Idaho’s training approach explicitly focused on the program culture and its importance in creating a “platform for change.” One official said, “It’s not just teaching or managing to the program requirements ... it’s deeper than that ... it’s working at the culture that drives the attitudes and interactions with customers.”

But training also presented three significant challenges to BPR implementation. First, as states moved toward universal workers handling multiple work support programs, staff needed to be cross-trained on work supports that were new to them, and the scope of information staff needed to know could be overwhelming. Second, training on new programs and new skills needed to occur as staff continued to serve clients daily. Finally, as states moved toward task-based processes, supervisors needed to learn new skills for managing processes, not just people.

As the first two challenges intertwined and states struggled to cross-train universal workers while serving clients, business process changes were sometimes rolled out without sufficient staff training. A supervisor in one North Carolina county said she supported the universal worker concept but “the bad part is that we haven’t really had time to train people.” Some North Carolina counties supplemented relatively minimal training with peer support by restructuring teams to include individuals with expertise in different programs who could share knowledge. Workers in Rhode Island reported they received relatively short trainings to give them a taste of the different tasks that they might now be required to perform, and they then relied on laminated “cheat sheets” to implement the unfamiliar policies. Rhode Island supervisors and workers alike reported a “sink or swim” approach during the rollout of the new universal worker process. A DHS leader in Rhode Island said:

My overall impression is that this is a good change for DHS and the client ... This has not been good for the worker, because we had not cross-trained the worker so that everyone is up to a skill level knowing about all the different programs within which they would have to intercede and which would impact the client ... If I’d do it in another state, I’d cross-train first.

In one Colorado county, where workers already handled multiple programs and just needed to learn new business processes, the office adjusted its business hours to accommodate staff training, temporarily reducing services for clients.

The third training challenge several states faced was that they did not fully anticipate the need for training managers and supervisors for new roles. State leaders in South Carolina said, “A lot of the problem was that when we went to the [new] process there wasn’t much training for supervisors. Prior to this, supervisors were “superworkers” and they were still in that mode.” South Carolina developed accountability plans for supervisors and taught them to monitor their regions to make sure work was accomplished. A manager in Colorado explained that managing processes rather than people was difficult, stating that “sometimes it feels like an assembly line.” To address this challenge, Colorado used some of its WSS resources to strengthen supervisor training. A state WSS leader said, “The [new business process] model drastically changed the role of the supervisor and not everyone came into that role with the skills. So we are making sure our investment in BPR and supervisors can last.” North Carolina initially did not involve supervisors very much in their business process changes and realized that as a result, supervisors had difficulty supporting staff’s new roles. Subsequently, North Carolina implemented training workshops (modeled on the supervisory training in Illinois) on topics such as change management; the state also made plans to restart ongoing regional meetings for supervisors.

Staff and Management Abilities and Willingness to Change

Successful business process changes depend on frontline workers and supervisors for implementation. In some cases, frontline workers and supervisors did not embrace business process changes. This is understandable given the time pressures, temporary setbacks, and other challenges discussed above. Changes to processes were sometimes met with mixed emotions, concern, resistance, and pushback. The WSS states worked hard to address this challenge through clear communication and engagement with staff at all levels. In South Carolina, some workers struggled to accept the shift from case-based processing to task-based processing. As one South Carolina staff member explained, “[the] biggest thing is cultural change. It was getting people in the mindset that you aren’t working in paper anymore. The whole idea of getting staff into the whole workflow idea of everything—that was a big cultural change. People were used to their own case file and their own caseload.” In North Carolina, workers struggled with shift from case-based to task-based processing while they were adapting to new processes from NC FAST implementation. In Rhode Island, concerns that a shift to task-based processing would lead to

job losses also stifled buy-in. In many states, seasoned workers were apprehensive about learning new technology systems, eligibility rules, and processes for multiple programs. Further, many workers take pride in being social workers, and some perceived that “task-based dumbs down the job, makes it more piece work and less social work,” as one respondent described. In Illinois, some workers felt that change was unnecessary and even felt insulted that the business process changes suggested they were not performing at their best. Initial concerns about some business process changes in Idaho were embedded in fears that history would repeat itself: staff worried that the new QFlow lobby management system would experience system defects and crashes as a previous lobby management tool had.

Competing Priorities and Goals across Agencies

Because the WSS states aimed to integrate service delivery process across SNAP, Medicaid, child care subsidies, or other programs, changes to those programs’ business processes often required coordination across agencies. A major contextual factor affecting approaches to business processes is the extent of separation between the agency overseeing Medicaid and the agency overseeing SNAP and other social services. State agencies’ structure and organization can lead to challenges because each agency operates under its own priorities, goals, and vision.

Among the WSS states, South Carolina has the most complete separation between the delivery of Medicaid services and the delivery of SNAP benefits. Before the WSS initiative, the two distinct agencies involved in managing the state’s work support programs (the Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS] and the Department of Social Services [DSS]) designed and changed their processes independently. Although the two departments were colocated in local offices and had considerable overlap in clients, the two departments had no information sharing and separate eligibility and enrollment processes and technology systems when the WSS initiative began. Clients needed to wait in separate lines and provide the same documentation twice. Workers for DHHS and DSS were compensated at different levels and used different day-to-day management strategies (differences still extant today). During the WSS initiative, the agencies have worked hard to address their structural differences and difficulties communicating and collaborating, and they have made mounting gains improving business processes in local offices. South Carolina’s joint business process change efforts focused on improving DHHS and DSS office lobbies by better aligning their frontline systems and supporting a no-wrong-door approach, even as the behind-the-scenes processes remain separate.

Even when state agencies or departments have positive partnerships, challenges can arise related to territory and ownership. New cross-program initiatives that require previously implemented programs or rules to be changed or undone can cause tension: agencies may be reluctant to change their existing processes, especially when they have invested resources in developing them. On the other hand, deciding who will take ownership of a project can also create challenges.

Federal mandates and legislation can also lead to shifting priorities for state agencies. When the ACA passed, state Medicaid agencies had the intensive and urgent task of implementing it, including redesigning state programs and complying with ACA rules and requirements. Initially, the worry was that existing state rules and policies aligned across programs risked being undone by the new mandates. Thus, even states such as Idaho, where the same division is responsible for both SNAP and Medicaid eligibility determination, had to consider the effect that new policies and shifting priorities could have on their integrated business process. However, an Idaho state leader describes an "aha moment," when he realized the agencies could continue working on program integration even in light of federal rule challenges. He explained, "ACA was a challenge at the beginning because it was this thing that was monolithic and sat outside of things. [But] our big aha was we should take the principals of ACA and lay them over what we do, and not try to lay them separate." He said, "While we have a few pain points because everyone wants to see them as separate ... the idea is that every time we look at something, we think about the integration that we want." Illinois and Rhode Island, too, focused on integration and used the ACA as an opportunity to address access and efficiency in all of its major programs, not just Medicaid.

Commitment and Dedication of a Range of Actors

The commitment and dedication of people in a range of roles throughout the state were essential for successful business process changes in the WSS states, even though obtaining and maintaining commitments was challenging.

Leadership Commitment

A commitment from state leaders, particularly directors of state health and human services departments, facilitated BPR changes in all WSS states. A WSS evaluation study on state government leadership found that state leaders who seized opportunities to lead positive, strategic change

employed three key strategies: (1) creating a clear shared vision and showing passion for the mission; (2) building trusting, reciprocal relationships inside and outside government; and (3) creating mutual accountability for shared, objective, and measurable goals (Hahn et al. 2015). In the context of business process changes, state leaders demonstrated their commitment through their words to staff, by putting resources into BPR efforts, and by establishing clear expectations that business processes would change.

The Rhode Island DHS director demonstrated her commitment by speaking directly to all staff in meetings where she spoke of their “unique moment in time” and the critical role of staff in making upcoming business process changes. Staff got the message. One staff member interviewed said:

I liked the director ... she was very good at explaining kind of like where we're headed, what we're looking at. It was all very encouraging, very positive. Specific details, I don't remember offhand. I do remember the general stuff. She has a direction she's going and I do believe she knows how to get there.

A community partner credited Idaho's faster processing time to the commitment state leaders showed in establishing clear expectations and steadfastly holding people accountable for them. “Thirty days to get food stamps done used to be acceptable but then it shifted,” one observer said. “It wasn't all well received in his (division) or externally but he just kept at it until he could show it [was feasible] and obviously he has the support of [the] director.”

Effective local office leaders also are essential for successfully changing business processes. “When a local leader is a champion for change, the change happens quickly with managers and staff,” said an Illinois WSS team member. She explained that when local office leaders generate ideas or can explain why attempts to change haven't been fully successful, it shows that they are working toward the change. In North Carolina's county-administered, state-supervised system, business process improvement is necessarily driven by local leaders, including county directors of social services. Many of the state's WSS efforts were designed to engage and support counties in ongoing self-assessment and process improvement. Consequently, one member of the WSS leadership team reported that, “counties have already been experimenting and piloting things... After some of the [state-sponsored] meetings, there were folks that went back and started...making big changes.” Another state administrator pointed out that some county leaders “don't have the passion. Some of them that I thought would embrace [business process improvements] and move forward have not.” She went on to note that strong leaders in one county play an important role supporting other counties, saying, “Peer pressure from their [fellow] directors is helping.”

Effective leadership requires more than offering motivation or allocating funds for changes; it also requires ensuring a structure exists to move the work forward and maintaining commitment to the changes in face of competing demands. In South Carolina, both agencies made verbal and financial commitments to the business process changes, but initially failed to act quickly on those commitments. One state leader reflected on this initial delay and miscommunication between agencies, saying, “In hindsight I have to come to the conclusion that there wasn’t true commitment.” After overcoming initial obstacles, however, state leaders from both agencies were able to agree on the BPR work and launch the no wrong door project, which has rolled out in two counties.

Dedicated Workgroups

Central workgroups helped promote business process changes by providing structure, state administrators said. “You have to have structured meetings, timelines, [and] follow-up,” said one core member of the Illinois WSS team. “There are so many goals and timelines that if you don’t put structure on it, you’ll spin out of control. That’s been a saving grace for us.” Similarly, Colorado established a WSS liaison for each of its work groups, including business process, to set target completion dates and otherwise add structure. Idaho did not have a work group dedicated to business process change. Instead, their overall management approach and structure support ongoing business process improvement. Some states’ business process groups were established early in the WSS period but faded in importance or were combined with other efforts. Other states’ business process improvement groups were created or flourished in the latter part of the initiative, such as North Carolina’s Operational Support Team and South Carolina’s group of high-level agency administrators. North Carolina’s Operational Support Team was charged with supporting counties in their business process improvement efforts; South Carolina’s team generally focused on specific problems or initiatives, whereas teams in other states tended to work on broadly developing ideas and moving them forward.

Third-Party Support and Expertise

Using outside vendors facilitated business process changes in many states. In Colorado, Rhode Island, and South Carolina, respondents highlighted three ways in which outside vendors were helpful. First, the vendors brought critical expertise and support. Although state and local human services staff had ideas for process improvements, they lacked sufficient expertise to fully enact them. States chose outside vendors when they wanted to implement a rigorous, comprehensive examination of their

business process from experts using proven methodologies and change implementation techniques. A Rhode Island respondent said, “We knew [our] ideas would work, but it’s having the help ... It’s more the mechanics on how to do it. We had the ideas.” Colorado respondents said vendors’ on-the-ground support was critical for moving their business process changes forward: “Having someone on the ground with you, talking with you, in your meetings, looking at data, and not just by phone, it really got us more focused than we had ever been.”

Second, outside vendors brought lessons from other states. “What I liked the most was being able to leverage things they developed in other states,” said a South Carolina respondent. A Colorado respondent explained, “What they have learned is some strategies work better than others. [The vendor] would say, ‘our statistics show this is more successful’.”

Third, when outside vendors are perceived as impartial, they can transcend the internal history and turf battles that can sometimes become barriers to success. A South Carolina respondent said, “We tend to rise to the occasion with outside people.” After working with an outside vendor, state staff tried to apply their knowledge continue the change process and expand it to other areas of the state. Illinois used an outside vendor in only one of its local offices to begin to change business processes, but the state’s own business process specialists participated in and supported the process. An Illinois team member said, “This was a terrific opportunity for us to compare the processes we have developed on the ground with best practices across the country.”

But using an outside vendor can have drawbacks. Their presence is typically temporary, creating some risk that offices may revert to old processes after the vendor leaves. In addition, the cost and procurement hurdles to obtain a vendor can be substantial in state government. Finally, vendors and consultants sometimes have prescribed methods for business process changes that do not precisely fit the state’s needs. Idaho, North Carolina, and Illinois chose not to rely heavily on outside vendors, instead developing in-house expertise. Illinois made this choice because the states’ lengthy procurement process did not fit in the necessary timeline for making the changes. Idaho had been making business process changes since 2008, originally with the help of hired consultants who introduced Lean management; by the time of the WSS grant, Idaho had the internal capacity to manage their own improvements.

Communication and Collaboration

Like so many other aspects of making business process changes, communication and collaboration among state and local agencies, stakeholders, and unions was important and difficult.

Cross-Agency Collaboration

Business process changes depend on positive relationships and collaboration among not only state health and human service agencies but also the state health insurance exchanges, counties, information technology departments, and any other involved entity. Positive relationships and collaboration facilitated business process changes in the WSS states by promoting trust and common understandings, by sharing practical tools and ideas, and by smoothing the logistics of the changes. When Colorado's Department of Human Services and its Department of Health Care Policy and Financing each sponsored a different BPR vendor in offices that administer both departments' programs, the two agencies signed a memorandum of understanding that clearly outlined who was responsible for which elements and how information would be communicated. According to a Colorado administrator, the agencies needed to "collectively agree that your folks are in my business and my folks are in your business ... This had to be in place to trust and move forward." When Illinois's human service agency and health care agency held a joint summit to inform local managers about upcoming business process changes, "It was very successful, with people leaving feeling informed and motivated," according to a state team member. "Although a summit is a considerable amount of work to plan and pulls staff from the offices, the returns from bringing people together, thanking them, and providing information far exceed the costs."

Communication and Engagement at All Levels within the State

Staff engagement at all levels facilitates the implementation of business process improvements by engendering buy-in, trust, and a sense of ownership; these in turn lead to cooperation and more efficient implementation. As a respondent in Illinois explained, worker buy-in is essential for implementing change:

It's difficult because you can tell someone they have to do something, and they'll say 'okay' but they won't do it. You don't have time to do that with 84 offices. You have to convince folks that they want to do it.

Engaging staff in the planning and implementation of changes can foster ownership as staff can provide input on changes. In Idaho, the shift to a statewide workforce began with both in-person meetings in which senior leaders discussed the vision for change with regional managers and statewide cultural discussions involving all frontline workers and led by the executive leaders in the Division of Welfare. In North Carolina, leadership invested heavily in building widespread buy-in for the vision that families will tell their story once and get the services they need; explaining why the business process improvements were important to customers and their livelihood helped build buy-in for changes. Communication with workers also ensured that everyone understood expectations and how to meet them. Illinois hired Kone Consulting to provide change management and leadership workshops as well as consulting to help supervisors and managers understand their roles in changing the business processes. One frontline worker in Rhode Island said, “The PDSA cycle, all of this, the Work Supports Strategies grant and ACA implementation—if you do it correctly ... it can actually elevate the state employee concept of the work they do. It really begins [transformation to] a much more professional workforce. So that I think is really positive. And as much fear and anxiety [we feel] in changing the new system, we can focus [on how] this will make your job easier and you can spend less time filling out paperwork and can spend more time talking with folks.” As a frontline supervisor in Rhode Island put it, “When you become part of change, it’s not so scary.”

Meetings with management and staff also provide an avenue for feedback to understand how successful the change is and how it could be more effectively and efficiently implemented. Idaho, for instance, has approached business process improvements with the motto of “problems first”: workers are encouraged to share what aspects of a process or change are not working and challenges they are encountering. As one staff member explained, “the understanding is [in our offices] it’s not going to go perfect; there will be problems/mistakes. Report and let’s fix, with the expectation that we’re going to get better about what we do.”

Engaging External Stakeholders

Engaging external stakeholders during the design and implementation of business process changes is also important. States relied on external stakeholders not only for input on proposed changes but also for help communicating with customers about process changes, such as managing customer expectations and reducing complaints about glitches during rollout that would take valuable time away from developing fixes. Although some WSS states engaged external stakeholders successfully, most would agree they could have done more. Rhode Island administrators expressed regret that they had

not communicated better with clients about how their interactions with caseworkers would be changing; better communication with clients and other external stakeholders likely could have avoided some postimplementation confusion. In Illinois, both external stakeholders and state leaders mentioned the need for better external communication but also highlighted the value of their partnership through the Social Services Advisory Council's Local Office Advisory Committee (LOAC):

We as advocates bring the real situations to the table when we meet here. If it weren't for people who worked in the trenches like us, who work for the people that we service, those stories wouldn't be able to impact the leadership. I think we're a sophisticated group. It's a lot of work, but DHS recognize us as partners and respect what we say, and take into consideration some of the improvements that we think should be made. We also have something at stake because we live in these communities. We do provide a component; we fill a void for the Department of Human Services and those that they service. (Illinois LOAC member)

A state leader echoed those comments:

I think the LOAC did help a lot. We had great partners in the advocates. They brought us information, they helped us see where things weren't working well, and they were responsive to our communication and honesty. I was talking to someone from [another state], and she asked whether anyone sued, and I said no, in part because both DHS and [the Department of Healthcare and Family Services] were in close communication from advocates about what we were doing and how we were trying to improve things. That made for a close partnership, to the extent that when we got a threatening letter from [the Food and Nutrition Service], we had advocates willing to write letters to [the Food and Nutrition Service] saying, 'hey, back off, they're trying.' To have somebody have that perspective, that made our lives a whole lot easier, it helped calm down customers, and made everything go much more smoothly. If we'd had lawsuits along the way, that would have just delayed us. (Illinois DHS official)

Relationships between Unions and Management

In Illinois and Rhode Island all line-level staff and supervisors are union members and staff roles are governed by union contracts, so the states needed to consider union rules when assessing potential business process changes. Rhode Island officials gave considerable attention to the potential union challenges of shifting to universal workers. In Rhode Island, two separate unions cover staff in the DHS offices: one for the eligibility technicians, who perform basic eligibility determinations, and another for the social workers, who perform more complex tasks and receive higher pay. As the workflow in the offices changed (e.g., particular questions originally asked during the intake process were now asked later in the process), some workers were concerned that tasks originally handled by members of one union might now be handled by members of another union. One Rhode Island official explained, "A lot of discussions [center on] where does that hand off happen, and we try to balance the labor requirements with making the experience customer friendly." By working attentively with the union during planning,

Rhode Island proceeded with statewide BPR changes that were largely accepted by the union representing the eligibility technicians (the social workers are less directly affected by BPR in its first year of rollout). Acceptance was facilitated by the agency director directly communicating with union leadership and by line workers, including union leadership, being involved in the design process. In addition, several line workers became champions of the change, and it was increasingly perceived as not being about cutting staff but rather about trying to improve working conditions despite persistent staffing shortages and unmanageable workloads.

In Illinois, where DHS workers are all covered by a single union, the level of union engagement early in the business redesign process was a point of contention between Illinois DHS and union leadership. The union wanted equal decisionmaking authority with the state. According to a union leader, “They weren’t willing to commit to that level of democratic process. So we said okay, we don’t think this is the best way of doing things, but at the same time we don’t want to stand in the way ... We said you go ahead and do your process, but we’re not going to be active participants.” Since then, the state has kept the union informed of decisions but has not engaged union leaders in decisionmaking. State officials regretted that they had not more effectively partnered with the union.

Funding

In addition to specific facilitators and challenges in business process changes, the facilitator or challenge of adequate funding underlies all changes.

State Resource and Staffing Levels

Limited state resources and the resulting insufficient staffing were initial motivators for business process changes in nearly all of the WSS states; business process changes are expected to allow states to do more with less. However, as one Colorado observer noted, BPR is “immensely helpful but at some point you just need more resources. You can only BPR your way out of the problem so much ... BPR isn’t going to fix everything.” Respondents from several WSS states noted that staff level could facilitate or detract from the success of business process changes. A local office administrator in Illinois credited the office’s recent successes to the combination of a more efficient business process and more staff: “Finally our staffing numbers are closer to what they’re supposed to be ... If we had the staffing of before, we would still have had to shuffle people around. But now with the staffing we can actually implement the processes.”

Rhode Island respondents also mentioned the role of continued staffing shortages in implementing business process changes and how efficiency improvements can make it harder to address remaining staffing shortages. A frontline worker said, “All the things the state has done are good and they’re working, but the issue is the workers ... We do a pretty good job with what we have, but there are holes with the system with the people. It comes down to bodies.” A manager said, “Making the argument that we still need more staff has become more difficult because we are [demonstrating] improvement. [However,] staffing is an issue and continues to be one.” Both frontline workers and some state leaders agreed, though, that the state needed not only more workers but also further efficiency improvements for both individuals and systems. The frontline worker quoted above went on to say, “In some offices there are enough bodies,” and offered examples of individual workers who were not as productive as others. A state leader said, “I am not ready to bring in other people until I have a shop that’s running efficiently ... I would say in some offices I would need more people. But the [solution in all the] offices is not more people.”

WSS Grant

The WSS grants to states, at around \$250,000 per year, were small relative to each state budget, but these focused, flexible funds greatly facilitated states’ business process changes. These funds allowed the states to dedicate a full-time staff member to managing and coordinating their efforts; to support the time of other staff, such as data analysts and business process specialists; and to pay for staff training on the new processes. Several states also used the funds to contract with business process vendors. A North Carolina official said, “The staff augmentation that is allowed by this additional funding is so important.” Idaho officials also noted that their activities were more easily justified when they were funded through WSS rather than state funds. The availability and independence of funds were important, leading one Idaho official to say, “If we didn’t have the funding we wouldn’t have been able to do as much.” A Rhode Island official noted the value of flexible funding: “[WSS] has provided funding that has massive flexibility. I have a lot of flexibility to say I can free people up to engage in thinking of this, to look at data use agreements. Funding is enough to provide flexibility where other funding does not. Medicaid and SNAP funding are very inflexible.” And a South Carolina official discussed the leveraging aspects of the WSS funds: “Just having a grant that we could leverage to say, this is out there for us, these are dedicated funds ... and it is now our responsibility to move forward with these funds ... I felt it was fire to help us going forward.”

How Are States Monitoring and Measuring Progress and Efficiency?

A primary goal of the WSS states' business process changes is to improve efficiency: to deliver services faster, more accurately, and with less burden on clients and staff. States generally expect modernization strategies in SNAP, Medicaid, and child care to improve client access and retention, reduce errors, improve customer service (such as customer satisfaction and timeliness), improve staff morale, and lead to long-term administrative cost efficiencies. According to an early WSS-related analysis, however, "research on the actual administrative effects of state modernization strategies is scant" (Mills et al. 2010). To help fill this gap, WSS states have been monitoring some of the specific outcomes that can indicate improvements in efficiency, including increased percentage of new applications that are processed within federally mandated time frames, reduced number of average days between application and benefit availability, increased same-day service delivery, improved staff morale, and increased numbers of positive client experiences. Although the states have different capacities for data collection and analyses, they all have engaged in some degree of data collection and analysis.

Examining these measures over time in conjunction with the timing of state activities shows improvement in outcomes after implementation of business changes. Because the WSS states have been making many changes to improve performance in addition to business process changes, and because other changes in state context (such as caseload fluctuations due to economic changes) could also affect the aforementioned measures, we cannot attribute changes in the measures to business process changes. Nonetheless, in some cases the timing of the business process changes and the results suggests a connection between the two.¹The following sections provide a high-level overview of the connection between business process changes and service improvement.

Efficiency Improvements in Application Processing

All of the WSS states that made business process changes saw some improvement in the efficiency of their service delivery. The most striking improvements were in the numbers of applicants receiving same-day benefit determination: the four states that tracked this all saw improvements, with dramatic improvements in Colorado, Illinois, and Rhode Island. Same-day service tripled in Rhode Island, from 10 percent of SNAP applicants receiving same-day service in mid-2011 to 30 percent in early 2015; same-

day service also increased for child care and Rhode Island Works (TANF) applicants. In Colorado, the statewide share of non-expedited SNAP applicants receiving same-day service doubled from 12 percent in January 2013 to 24 percent in July 2015. Including expedited SNAP cases, 33 percent of all SNAP applications received same-day service. According to state administrative data and client survey responses, Colorado's increases in same day service were most pronounced in counties that made intensive business process changes. Idaho already provided same-day service to 70 percent of SNAP applicants when WSS began, but the share still increased to 74 percent by the end of the initiative. There are no data on same-day service in South Carolina or North Carolina, but the share of SNAP applicants in South Carolina receiving an eligibility decision within two weeks jumped from 21 percent in mid-2012 to 40 percent in mid-2015.

The improvements in same day service were not, however, accompanied by improvements in the percentage of cases meeting federal requirements for timely processing. States are required by federal law to process SNAP applications within 30 days or within 7 days for "expedited" SNAP cases that meet certain criteria ("timely processing" is considered 45 days for Medicaid and not defined for child care). Between 2010 and 2014, the percentage of SNAP applications meeting federal requirements for timely processing did not change substantially or consistently across states. Colorado, which has been under a state court order since 2010 to meet specific processing time benchmarks for SNAP, Colorado Works (TANF), and Medicaid, did improve its percentage of timely processing from 80 to more than 90 percent. Idaho, which started at 98 percent, also saw improvement. However, North Carolina's rate deteriorated from 88 to 73 percent, and Illinois's fluctuated between 63 percent and 82 percent. Both Rhode Island and South Carolina had timeliness levels that remained around 90 percent.

Although federal timeliness did not improve consistently, four of the six WSS states saw net reductions in the average number of days between receiving a SNAP application and determining or administering benefits. South Carolina reduced the average days from SNAP application to eligibility decision from 21 days in late 2011 to 17 days in mid-2015, Illinois similarly cut its average processing time from 16 to 13 days over the same period, and Rhode Island cut its average processing time from 10 days in mid-2011 to 5 days in early 2015. Idaho had a remarkably fast average processing time for SNAP decisions of 2.4 days in early 2010 and improved that further to an average of 1.7 days in early 2015. Such data were not reported in North Carolina, but data on other measures (such as federal timeliness) suggest that average processing time probably increased there.

The overall improvements in processing times for the WSS states mask considerable fluctuations in individual states over the period. In Illinois, average days of SNAP processing dramatically worsened as the state struggled with the implementation of the ACA and the state's new integrated eligibility

system, though numbers eventually rebounded and ultimately improved. South Carolina’s average SNAP processing time shows some dips related to periods of beginning or revising business process improvements. Some of the fluctuations in processing time relate to the overall volume of applications states were handling as the ACA was implemented. Rollouts of new technology and rollouts of new business process improvements also were associated with temporary increases in processing times as staff were pulled for training and adjusted to the new systems and processes. In addition, as states worked through a backlog of cases, processing times temporarily worsened. In North Carolina, backlogs created by slowdowns and glitches in the new eligibility determination system led to slower processing, culminating in timeliness sanctions from the US Department of Agriculture in 2013. Despite issues during initial rollouts in North Carolina and other states, eliminating the backlogs and smoothing out the functionality of eligibility determination systems was expected ultimately to improve the processing times for future applications. Some states credit their business process changes with helping to work through their backlogs. A Larimer County, Colorado manager said, “There was a day that the backlog had dropped over 400 items over three days ... We thought we had lost cases. It was just amazing that [the new business process was] starting to click.”

Program Integrity and Accuracy

Some WSS states faced at least temporary challenges with the accuracy of benefit decisions. The WSS states as a group began the initiative with an average SNAP error rate better than the national average, but ended worse than the national average; their worst average error rates occurred in the middle of the WSS period and were followed by improvements. Because Colorado so closely monitors its timeliness and accuracy data, state leaders noticed that although timeliness was improving, errors were reaching an alarming rate. Exploring the source of the worker errors and then closely monitoring accuracy, Colorado has been dramatically improving its error rate in the past few years while improving timeliness.

Client Experiences

Business process changes aimed not only to deliver services faster and more accurately but also to deliver them with fewer burdens on clients and staff. Information from client experience surveys, client focus groups, and interviews with state staff and stakeholders shows overall improved client experiences despite some lingering issues. The forthcoming companion report (Isaacs, Katz, and Amin)

includes a more thorough analysis of client experiences changes, but the following examples give a sense of the range of client experiences.

An Idaho focus group participant described the experience of applying for SNAP: “It was like everybody (other focus group members) said, streamlined. ... They just asked everything, boom, boom, boom, and how many ever minutes later I was given a card and they said I'll get such and such amount of food stamps in a day and a half ... and I was like, ‘Wow, okay, this is pretty cool.’” Clients and staff in other states shared similar anecdotes of applicants’ pleasant surprise with relatively efficient processes.

Rhode Island data on lobby wait times show that clients have shorter waits than in the past, though improvements can still be made. A state official reported that the Providence office had locked its doors because of an overcrowded lobby no more than once a month in the past year, a rate that was down from about three or four times a month. A Rhode Island client said of past shutdowns, “In the winter, it’s horrible, just waiting there in the cold because they shut down so it won’t get too full. Although Rhode Island clients in the WSS focus group generally experienced faster service than in the past, they also reported frustration with waiting for service at the DHS office. Illinois respondents, including state and local staff and stakeholders, discussed the trade-offs between the personalized approach of their former case-based business process and the greater efficiency of the new task-based process. One state leader said, “As the overall volume increases, some customers are seeing what they see as a downside of task based, which is a depersonalization. And that depersonalization wouldn’t matter so much except for the lack of a safety net that they’re feeling. They’re feeling that there’s no one at the local office that knows them.” Another acknowledged this point but added, “People at the end of the day don’t really care as long as they get their benefits in a timely manner.” Illinois respondents also noted that wait times for clients had temporarily increased during the transition to the new business model, partly because of the transition itself and partly because of the coincidental increase in case volume related to the ACA and technological challenges with the state’s new integrated eligibility system.

Staff Morale

Staff morale is closely linked to quality of service and client experiences: staff feel better when they perceive that they are better able to do their jobs and help clients. Although many staff initially were skeptical that the new business processes would yield noticeable results, staff across most of the WSS states reported finally experiencing efficiency improvements. One state respondent said, “Staff are excited about [the BPR changes] because we are not getting the phone calls we used to get and staff

aren't carrying around the guilt they weren't able to process applications timely. From that perspective, it's made a huge difference for staff." A frontline worker in another state said of the switch to universal caseloads, "In the past, when I was gone for a week, cases were loaded up in my office and backed up. It is now wonderful for clients and workers." Similarly, an office manager said the manageable workload has boosted staff morale. In the past, the workload was so high that, "you'd go home thinking, 'man I'm never going to get on top of this.' We manage it so much better [now] that I think staff leave very satisfied every day. They're tired but [there is] no overwhelming load of work sitting on their desk ... [We have] seen a huge difference in the approach and the overall morale of staff."

But not all staff reported improved morale. Some frontline workers and others reported mixed feelings about the shift from case-based to task-based processing. Some missed the professional autonomy and personal relationships that came with having their own caseload; in contrast, one observer noted, "There are some more veteran caseworkers who like aspects of not getting angry calls because they have 1,000 people they are responsible for and you can't possibly be responsive to all 1,000 and someone's always angry."

Some frontline workers expressed frustration and concern shortly after implementing business process changes that they were not able to help customers as much as was needed. One said there was "nothing human about the process"; another said, "We're giving them their benefit, but we're not giving them [respectful, personal service]. Sometimes what they need is one minute of that extra interaction of telling them that in six months you'll get the [recertification] forms and this is what you need to do. We don't have that one minute any more. If you don't have that minute to have a nice conversation with them ... they're leaving with anger. They feel like state workers are horrible." Other frontline workers reported "workers are more stressed and frazzled" because they are still receiving training on new processes and don't feel fully prepared to perform their jobs. Several frontline workers agreed that morale was poor, citing both understaffing and insufficient training.

As time went on, some staff saw a light at the end of the tunnel. One state leader said, "Staff feel a little more satisfied that they're actually ... bringing eligibility, seeing people walking away with eligibility instead of just waiting [and] requesting additional information and pending things." Another said, "Even though we're the same numbers [of staff], it feels like there are more hands on deck" than before the BPR. Another said, "Overall, I do think it is better, but there are issues."

A Work in Progress

Improving business processes is an ongoing project. Still, some of the WSS states have made considerable progress in making the major changes to improve their efficiency, client experiences, and staff morale. The results from recent business process changes could take some time to materialize. Nonetheless, that states were able to make the business process changes despite many challenges is a huge accomplishment. An exuberant Rhode Island state official described the state's business process changes as "the turning of the Titanic. The big ship turned. It turned, it really did turn. It turned, absolutely, it turned and it is not going to turn back. That's the biggest accomplishment."

Conclusions

The WSS states approached business process improvements from many starting points and state contexts and chose different paths, but their varied experiences yielded some consistent lessons.² The most fundamental lesson from the WSS state experiences is that **making business process changes is possible** in state social service agencies. Three other lessons emerged.

First, **making business process improvements is a long, iterative effort**, not something that can be quickly implemented and considered complete. Developing and implementing business process changes requires a concerted effort, often involving one-on-one work with individual offices and managers. Sometimes initial changes are made incrementally, gradually encompassing more aspects of the service delivery process. Temporary setbacks, such as increases in processing times while staff learn new processes, are expected, but states can mitigate these by proactively training staff and providing close support. After initial changes are made, the processes need to be continually monitored and managed to a standard of customer service. Ultimately, as WSS states begin to see positive results from their initial changes, they have recognized the importance of incorporating ongoing business process evaluation and improvement into their organizational culture.

Second, **changing business processes requires trust, collaboration, communication, and leadership** among many entities, including multiple state agencies, local or county office leaders, office supervisors, frontline workers, community stakeholders, and unions. If families come to a single local office to apply for both medical and food assistance but the two programs are governed by separate state agencies, both agencies need to agree to the on-the-ground service delivery changes. Regardless of their source, changes to business processes need to be communicated clearly and effectively to the office leaders, supervisors, and staff whose daily actions are expected to change. Many states have found it useful to involve the frontline staff, supervisors, and office leaders in developing the changes because they are best situated to identify the bottlenecks in the old processes and realistic ways to streamline a new process. Further, staff who have developed a solution may be more likely to implement it. In addition, if the workers providing social services are members of a union, as they are in Illinois and Rhode Island, then changes to their day-to-day tasks may need to be made in coordination with the union. Finally, if counties have formal autonomy over their business processes (as they do in Colorado and North Carolina, and as local offices have informally in Illinois), the state will need to work with counties or local offices to determine the whether business processes will be standardized across the state or allow for local flexibility.

Third, **business processes are inseparable from technology and policy.**³ How applications and other actions are processed in a social service office depends largely on policies, such as what documentation is required from customers and how quickly an agency is required to process applications and other actions. The process also depends on the computer systems and other technology that help determine an applicant's eligibility and manage ongoing cases. The interconnections among business processes, technology, and policy could be seen as dictating business processes or as reason to declare change to be impossibly complicated, but such connections can also be recognized as necessary to facilitate change. For example, a state may change a policy to simplify a process for applicants, but it is only when the business process changes to reflect that new policy that a family applying for assistance will see a difference. Similarly, if a documentation requirement creates a burdensome, duplicative process, a change to the state documentation policy can facilitate a more streamlined and efficient process. The alignment of technology and business processes can facilitate or hinder change. For instance, a computerized case management system designed to support a case-based business process may hinder a change toward a task-based business process, as North Carolina experienced. On the other hand, an integrated business process that depends on universal workers could facilitate development of a computer system that includes all of the state's social service programs, as in Rhode Island.

Notes

1. For a more detailed evaluation of state outcomes, see Isaacs, Katz, and Amin (forthcoming).
2. For more information on the context of each WSS state, see Hahn, Isaacs, and Rohacek (2016).
3. For a detailed evaluation of the WSS states' use of technology to improve delivery of benefits, see Loprest, Gearing, and Kassabian (2016). For a detailed evaluation of the WSS states' policy changes to streamline program access, see Isaacs, Katz, and Kassabian (2016).

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