



Transforming Case Management for Child Welfare

Modernizing child welfare case management technologies can help agencies ease their staff burdens while transforming vital public services. But solutions can seem elusive, and success is far from certain. Leaders must make wise decisions about data, automation and technology vendors.

Why Modernization Matters

Transformation starts in the field, where caseworkers collect the data that provides the bedrock for child welfare systems. “It’s about bringing the right

information to the right user at the right time,” says Richelle Mathieu, solutions consulting leader for state and local government with Pegasystems, which helps organizations automate and streamline complex manual processes.

An agency caseworker needs data access anytime, anywhere via a mobile device. An agency leader needs analytics data to guide strategies and improve efficiency. Courts need compliance data to ensure proper oversight. And everybody needs their data in a standard, simple-to-use format that aligns with their work processes.

A well-designed, cloud-based platform can propel this kind of transformation. What would it look like? A straightforward demonstration happened in 2020, when the U.S. Census Bureau collected data from American households via mobile technologies. Gone were the pencils and clipboards of previous decades.

“It was the first time that the people in the field collecting census data completed all aspects of their work on mobile devices,” Mathieu says. Using mobile technologies, census data collectors accepted assignments; plotted the

Modernizing child welfare case management technologies can help agencies ease their staff burdens while transforming vital public services.



User interfaces can be configured to ensure system users stay compliant while entering and accessing sensitive data.

most efficient order to visit households; submitted their hours; and securely recorded, encrypted and transmitted all the respondents' information.

The results were phenomenal: Compared to 2010, the agency in 2020 saw nearly a 50% improvement in productivity, according to Mathieu.

At first glance, child welfare governance has little in common with a once-in-a-decade census. But they share a common principle: Technology transformation delivers higher productivity and a wealth of data insights. And caseworkers have more time to spend with the children and families they serve.

How a Modernized System Works

Modernized child welfare systems start with mobile devices in the field that replace paper-based data input. Standardized processes reduce the likelihood of human error. A virtual data layer delivers real-time insights to agency leadership. Caseworkers also have access to this data, ensuring they can answer client questions in real time.

The agency can use modern software to create a comprehensive child welfare portal with a unified user experience for all personnel. Agency staff can be trained to create input forms for specific kinds of user personas. A court clerk and a caseworker have different data

requirements, so they will receive a user experience tailored to their specific workflows. The judge in family court can see the same data as the caseworker and clerk, but the presentation is customized to match their workflow.

When built on the right software platform, a modern child welfare system integrates easily with other agency systems to improve service delivery and expand data sharing. "People no longer have to experience the swivel-chair effect, where they're always looking stuff up in one system and then looking at something else in another system," says Ann Kelly, senior solution consultant with Pegasystems.

Such software also acknowledges the nuances of compliance and regulation. User interfaces can be configured to make sure system users stay compliant while entering and accessing sensitive data. Encryption can add an extra layer of privacy protection. This set-up gives agency leaders a better handle on audits and other compliance issues, which can help with securing essential funding.

Modernized Data Reporting

Agencies depend on data for reporting to meet legislative mandates. But the data in legacy systems isn't always useful. Michael Yozzi, child welfare leader with Amazon Web Services (AWS), recalls


a case in which the data and reality didn't match. "One of the largest child welfare agencies in the country told me a story about filtering on dozens of foster homes for children with disabilities and only coming up with two results," Yozzi says. "They knew they had more homes that met the criteria."

Data helps agencies create reports to satisfy regulators and stay compliant, but the reports don't necessarily help workers drive outcomes for children and families, Yozzi says. Modern cloud-based systems typically make it easier to pull data from multiple sources and generate analytics and actionable insights. And cloud service providers have tools to enable advanced data science capabilities like artificial intelligence and machine learning.

The Ideal Child Welfare Services Solution

A successful modernization project never loses its focus on the people who matter most. "There's a big opportunity to engage with children and families like never before," Kelly says.

Making that happen requires the right technology. "We've participated in months and months of user experience research with all kinds of stakeholders," Mathieu says. "And one thing that's clear is they need access to data, no matter where it resides. They need flexibility to



Tips for Successful Technology Modernizations

Modernization can help leaders retain talent and improve services to vulnerable youth. The following tips give leaders a framework for making the best technology choices for their agencies.

■ **Start with people.** You'll need to gain buy-in from government executives, elected officials and caseworkers. Leaders respond to the usual incentives: higher productivity and better experiences for the voting public. Users respond best when they can participate in the choice of technologies and receive thorough training and timely support.

The most transformative tools focus on human-centered design. Well-designed user interfaces anticipate how people interact with software and provide intuitive workflows for their everyday challenges. Since most people take their phones with them everywhere, mobile solutions will drive the most value for child welfare managers.

"We've got to consider the impact of our solutions on the end users themselves," Mathieu says.

■ **Uphold your policies and processes.** The move to human-centered design means you don't have to mold your policies and processes to suit the requirements of software. Instead, software should adapt to your agency's requirements.

■ **Establish priorities.** Technology providers try to cast a wide net, offering far more features than your system might need. Choose tools that drive the most value for your child welfare system within your budget. You'll also want to choose services that align with funding sources, like grants for technology upgrades.

■ **Create user portals.** Give every stakeholder a common location to access critical data. While the interface for a portal is standardized, workflows within the portal can be customized for specific activities like preparing data for court or adding new clients to the system. You may have different portals for external and internal users, but each can have a similar layout and user interface.

■ **Build in stages.** You'll feel tempted to do a rip-and-replace upgrade. This isn't always practical. You may have technologies

with years of useful life left. Budget limitations may limit your options. These realities make it more sensible to do a "wraparound" transformation that merges the newest technologies with legacy systems that are too costly or complicated to replace.

Many agencies start with a few pilot projects, work out the kinks and iterate based on user feedback. This approach reinforces a people-first strategy and encourages adoption because users can see their suggestions generating results.

■ **Automate manual processes.** Manual data entry presents many automation opportunities. Start by analyzing workflows and identifying manual processes that digital tools can replicate. For instance, you may be able to create standard data-input forms with user guides to walk people through processes and maintain compliance.

Low-code software makes it much easier to automate processes. These platforms do not require advanced programming expertise, meaning agency staff can spin up new solutions based on their own changing needs.

■ **Integrate data sources.** "It's critical for agencies working in the child welfare field to be able to share data across county systems," Kelly says. Sharing can extend to multiple systems, like public health and criminal justice, and multiple software platforms. Well-designed software makes it easy to fetch data from multiple sources and present it in standard formats.

■ **Keep an eye on the future.** Cloud providers have a strong incentive to keep their solutions secure and responsive to competitive challenges. If you buy a commercial, off-the-shelf solution, you could get stuck with out-of-date technology.



Security and privacy are paramount. Child welfare agency workers need tools that safeguard client data and ensure confidentiality.

do their business processes their way, and they don't want to be forced to follow predefined processes that come with an outdated, prebuilt system.”

You also want speed, flexibility and mobility to customize processes, procedures and workflows. The user interface should be human-centered — intuitive, easy to learn and readily customized. The provider should offer extensive training and support. Agencies should pay special attention to the ability to quickly scale IT resources up or down to control costs. Don't neglect compliance. A good platform will help you automate and enforce regulatory standards.

Security and privacy are also paramount. Child welfare agency workers need tools that safeguard client data and ensure confidentiality.

Ultimately, though, modernization is about empowering caseworkers to focus on their core mission. “If you ask a caseworker why they do it, it comes down to them really wanting to help the kids and the families,” Kelly says. “It's a hard job. And it's important to give caseworkers the right tools to do the job.”

This piece was written and produced by the Governing Content Studio, with information and input from Pegasystems.

The must-haves.

A robust, modern child welfare management system provides:

- + Offline capabilities so case managers can input data in areas without internet access and update the system when connectivity returns
- + Low-code applications that enable staff to develop apps quickly without advanced programming skills
- + Real-time insights via a virtual data layer
- + Prebuilt workflows and easy automation of manual, paper-based processes
- + Portals offering a common interface for internal and external users
- + Reliable, scalable and secure data storage and database migration support
- + Permissions processes that are secure and easy to implement

Produced by:



Governing covers politics, policy and management for state and local government leaders. Recognized as the most credible and authoritative voice in its field, Governing provides non-partisan news, insight and analysis on budget and finance; transportation and infrastructure; workforce and economic development; health and human services and more. Governing is a division of e.Republic, the nation's only media and research company focused exclusively on state and local government and education. www.governing.com

Sponsored by:



Get more from your child welfare systems with a modernization plan. Partner with Pegasystems and AWS to help your organization better serve children and families and provide a more efficient workflow for your case managers. For more information contact Pega at: ChildWelfareInfo@pega.com

Pega is a powerful low-code platform that empowers the world's leading enterprises to Build for Change®. Clients use our AI-powered decisioning and workflow automation to solve their most pressing business challenges — from personalizing engagement to automating service to streamlining operations. Since 1983, we've built our scalable and flexible architecture to help enterprises meet today's customer demands while continuously transforming for tomorrow.



Amazon Web Services (AWS) Worldwide Public Sector helps government, education, and nonprofit customers deploy cloud services to reduce costs, drive efficiencies, and increase innovation across the globe. With AWS, you only pay for what you use, with no up-front physical infrastructure expenses or long-term commitments. Learn more about how you can transform your organization with **Amazon Web Services (AWS)**.

<https://aws.amazon.com/government-education/government/>