Work Support Strategies Initiative
12 Lessons on Program Integration and Innovation

Introduction & Executive Summary

Receipt of public work supports, such as nutrition assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), health insurance under Medicaid, and child care subsidies, can make a critical difference for low-income workers, stabilizing their employment and allowing them to meet their families' basic needs. They also improve children's long-term health and educational outcomes. Unfortunately, many families do not get the full package of work support benefits for which they are eligible. In 2011, about four in ten working households eligible for SNAP did not participate. Furthermore, the limited data available showed that families' joint participation in Medicaid, SNAP and child care was very low compared to participation in any single program (less than 10 percent in some cases).[1]

Too often, families seeking assistance (especially those applying for multiple programs) encounter confusing, repetitive bureaucratic processes as well as antiquated, understaffed, and siloed state delivery systems. The Great Recession worsened these longstanding problems, creating a "perfect storm" where increases in the number of needy families coincided with reduced staffing or hiring freezes because of state budget constraints. States that participated in the Work Support Strategies initiative were eager to find ways to improve services to families. Some states began this work from scratch, while others built on existing reform initiatives.

The Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative provided six diverse states (Rhode Island, North Carolina, South Carolina, Illinois, Colorado, and Idaho) with grants funds, intensive technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning opportunities as they analyzed their service delivery systems and implemented improvements. These states set out to align programs and streamline processes to ensure that low-income working families could access and keep benefits for as long as they are eligible. While the states experienced some setbacks and let-downs, they all have hard-earned lessons, substantial achievements, and a vision to carry the work forward.

WSS states implemented concrete administrative reforms while taking steps to transform their agencies' culture. For example, all six states have made changes that allow families to apply simultaneously for Medicaid and SNAP. At the same time, states have also improved training for frontline staff as well as internal communications.[2] One of North Carolina's biggest accomplishments is creating a "try and try again" culture at the county level. County leaders have taken risks, assessed progress, and learned from mistakes as they integrate their intake processes for customers who are eligible for multiple programs.

The diversity across states—in political environment, county-versus state-administered, geography, and size of population served—makes the lessons relevant to much of the nation. WSS also gave states rich peer-to-peer learning opportunities, through which they gained new strategies to adapt to their own contexts. This paper distills 12 key lessons from WSS to inform leaders and advocates in states, counties, and cities that face similar challenges. These lessons are gleaned from the reflections of participating states—from agency leaders to local office staff—as well as the organizations that provided technical assistance, coaching, and evaluation. The paper complements those insights with the author's unique dual perspective; she began the project as a member of Illinois' WSS team before transitioning to the national team as deputy director of WSS.

Getting Started

One key lesson is the importance of **starting (or refreshing) a reform initiative with deep diagnosis combined with action and active learning**. We caution against promising that a handful of changes will lead to huge results without first understanding the scope and magnitude of the challenges. Instead, leaders should commit to a transparent process to uncover their biggest challenges through active learning, piloting small or discrete changes, and identifying quick wins to build momentum along the way.

Develop a **vision that is inspirational and concrete**—compelling enough to catalyze action and concrete enough to operationalize. North Carolina's vision—families will tell their stories once and receive the services that they need—has driven policy alignment, collaboration across programs, the launch of an integrated eligibility system, and changes to frontline practice.

Program integration requires collaboration that takes time, relationship building, and new infrastructure. Leveraging the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Rhode Island has designed a new computer system that will integrate the eligibility processes for health and human services programs (scheduled to launch in 2016). Recognizing that families need a full package of work supports to succeed, health leaders have "total commitment" to integrating with human services. In any state, officials at every level can take responsibility to ensure collaboration across programs.

When the vision contrasts so greatly with current circumstances that it seems unattainable, **use the power of "seeing is believing"** by speaking with or visiting other states and

counties who have successes to share. Integrating and aligning across systems is a long-term commitment; lasting connections and support from peers can help state leaders to maintain motivation, regroup after failure, and keep in mind that *change is possible*.

With a clear understanding of the biggest challenges, peers from whom to draw support, strong collaboration to support integration, and a vision to guide change, state leaders can explain to those who are skeptical or impatient: *this is what've we've done already, what we've learned, and why we believe these are the right next steps to achieve a new vision*.

Putting the Pieces Together

WSS states did not look for a silver bullet. They committed to comprehensive systems reform by reviewing policy, business processes, technology, data, management practices, and their procedures for handling renewals as well as new applications. All these needed to be examined and re-examined over time to ensure customers' experiences lived up to states' visions.

The **states took advantage of their authority to align and streamline policy**. State leaders learned that they could support integration by updating policies they already had the power to change without federal action.[3] Illinois and South Carolina also took advantage of waivers that allowed them to use customers' SNAP information for Medicaid enrollment.[4] But changing policies requires more than updating manuals. States learned to support successful implementation of policy changes by providing frontline staff and managers with 1) guidance and training on how to implement new rules and business processes; 2) technology to support new processes; and 3) data to monitor progress on changes.

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

We can't write about the past four years without discussing the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which brought many opportunities to transform service delivery in both health and human services programs. ACA required large-scale changes to states' Medicaid eligibility and enrollment systems and offered enhanced funding to underwrite the costs for doing so. ACA and the A-87 Cost Allocation Exception, which allows human service programs to share a wide range of eligibility and enrollment information technology (IT) components, have been game-changing opportunities for states seeking to reform service delivery and integrate across health and human services programs. All six WSS states took advantage of the federal funding match to enhance or build new eligibility and enrollment systems and five states have or were (at the time of this paper's publication) in the process of building integrated eligibility for both health and human services programs. They have met ACA's requirements for new Medicaid policy and enrollment processes while keeping health and human services integration as a goal.

Redesign local office business processes to reduce delays and backlogs and support program integration. Several states set same-day service as a goal, implementing strategies like electronic data matches to verify customer information and processing applications on the spot for walk-in customers. Idaho explains it this way: "Customers come to us for an eligibility decision; we want to do everything we can to give them that decision in one meeting." There is no single best practice; states considered a number of work flow options and alternative approaches to assigning work to caseworkers. WSS states have implemented a variety of business process models including universal caseworkers, task-based business processes, centralized units, and others.

Design and refine technology to serve your vision—not the other way around. Technology can be extremely powerful in improving timeliness, accuracy, and program integration for the benefit of both staff and families. All the states implemented major changes or complete replacements of their automated eligibility systems during the WSS period. However, they also learned that technology reform needs to serve, not lead, the work. As state leaders design or procure new technology, they should be cognizant of how local/county staff and

leaders will use it. Idaho emphasized the importance of implementing policies and procedures that match their vision before seeking technology to support it. While this approach may take longer, Idaho focuses on "having the right technology solution at the right time; technology solutions that do not support business priorities are the wrong solution."

Focus as much on building a data-friendly culture as on the development of new and better metrics and reports. Invest in building all three data capacities: **1) getting it**; **2) understanding it**; and **3) using it**. Don't focus solely on creating highly technical reports, which can be expensive and time-consuming, without ensuring that staff at every level understand how to use data to make decisions or monitor performance.

Equip local leaders and frontline supervisors with the skills to lead change and manage new processes. To sustain reforms, multiple states prioritized professional development for managers, ensuring they have the skills to lead change and manage in a new and evolving environment. On our closing site visit to South Carolina, senior officials highlighted the need for trainers to be forward-thinking and to continually update the training they offer, based on the skills required to support the agency's strategic direction.

Address churn; don't focus only on initial applications. When eligible recipients "churn"—meaning they fail to complete their renewals but then return to apply again—they experience major instability. WSS states recognized that an inflated volume of new applications *is inefficient* for agencies when successful renewal of benefits requires less time and resources.[5] State agencies can simplify renewal protocols to facilitate more successful renewals.

Institutionalizing Change

To sustain change, continue improvement on the core components of reform above, overemphasize communication to keep the vision at the forefront of the agency, and ensure transparency and problem-solving is part of the agency culture.

Communicate consistently and creatively to ensure staff, customers, community partners, and external stakeholders understand the vision that guides the agency's actions as well as the potential for failures and setbacks. WSS states have used proactive strategies to improve communication: customer and staff surveys, state-wide calls with managers, newsletters, whiteboards in local offices, daily supervisor "huddles" in local offices, suggestion boxes for "bright ideas," and video-conference "coffee chats" with state leaders.

Promote a culture of transparency and solutions. Local leaders have more incentive to collaborate, engage in open conversation, and share their most pressing struggles and issues when these conversations produce mutual learning and problem solving, rather than finger pointing.

It is important to note that none of these lessons guarantee a smooth ride to success. On the contrary, states gained these insights by persevering through many challenges. Some goals were not achieved, new technology was delayed and hard to implement, some successes in local offices were difficult to replicate elsewhere, unrelated crises in state operations slowed progress, and turnover of key team members and leaders disrupted plans.

Despite myriad challenges, these six states have proven that *it is*, in fact, possible, to create large-scale, on-the-ground changes for families and workers that may have (in some states) seemed improbable or impossible in the past. Challenges are part of progress. When leaders are honest and committed to moving forward, they can use negative experiences to revitalize strategy, apply lessons learned, and build momentum to sustain progress. For national observers of both the safety net programs and of state government effectiveness more broadly, it is also important to see how high a bar states can set for themselves when leaders have the opportunity, the commitment, and the high quality peer and expert support. Therefore, in this paper, we summarize the toughest challenges and great successes among WSS states.

Getting Started

Leaders who undertake system changes are often impatient to get started. External partners such as federal officials, state legislators, the governor's office, judicial monitors, or advocates may also press for immediate reforms. But jumping into action without fully understanding what is actually happening—and setting a clear vision for where the agency wants to go—can be counterproductive. Such hasty action may impede future progress by allowing the real issues to fester, leaving agency workers who have struggled with these issues for years feeling disinvested and frustrated. Or, in the absence of an overall vision, agencies may make a few changes and then believe that they are done. Stepping back to diagnose deep issues, develop a vision, build strong collaborations, and facilitate peer learning are important ways to carve out a clear path forward.

1. *Diagnose your toughest challenges while taking early action and actively learning.*

Begin with a deep analysis of systems and processes to uncover underlying problems, real solutions, and early opportunities for change. WSS began with a year of active planning to support diagnosis and early action steps, providing states with technical assistance, peer support, and direct grants. By piloting changes on a small scale or implementing changes incrementally, states gained a deeper understanding of their most significant challenges and identified opportunities for quick wins.

Using lean software development techniques, Idaho has made large-scale technology changes incrementally. Similarly, major business changes are broken down into discrete changes; after each step, the state identifies what worked and didn't using data and process analysis, and then carries those lessons forward to guide next steps. [6]

Here are some strategies that led to early innovation and breakthroughs:

- *Be explicit about "hypotheses,"* then explore and challenge them. Some state leaders initially assumed that new training for caseworkers was the key to significant change at the local level. As states got deeper into planning and implementing local-level changes, they recognized the need to focus on the people who were being asked to manage work in a new way, and therefore worked to equip frontline leaders and supervisors with the skills required to lead change.
- *Gather information from multiple sources and perspectives.*[7] To initiate a change process that will transform customers' experience, include feedback in early assessments from customers and those who directly serve customers (frontline staff and managers, advocates, and community organizations). Inviting people to offer their perspectives draws them into the process and makes them feel invested.
- *Use data to balance anecdotes and subjective opinions with hard evidence. Use an assessment tool to give structure to this process and to guide and challenge your thinking.* State leaders can use assessment tools to help them organize data and information as they examine policy and identify potential changes. For example, the WSS child care technical assistance group designed a tool to help states evaluate strategies for simplifying child care assistance as well as identifying opportunities for alignment with other work supports.[8]
- *Consider using an outside facilitator or technical assistance (TA) provider to help define challenges and identify opportunities in the early stages.* An external partner can bring key stakeholders to the table to focus on core goals when past bad experiences have made it difficult to come together.
- *Look for quick wins.* Frontline staff and customers are best equipped to identify easy ways to improve processes and boost staff morale and customer satisfaction. Illinois began its extensive redesign of the

customer experience by creating a work environment that staff could be proud to work in (e.g., clearing out offices that were overrun with paper records, replacing old equipment and carpets, and posting new signage in waiting rooms). This signalled that customers and workers were valued.

Instead of promising sweeping results right away, commit to being transparent about issues and blending diagnosis with quick wins, small-scale pilots, and/or incremental changes. In-depth diagnosis can transform the narrative from vague—*we're working on it*—to clear and specific—*what we've done already, what we've learned, and why we've chosen these next steps*. Early action can build momentum for change and demonstrate that state leaders are serious and sincere about reform.

2. Develop and live by a vision that is inspirational and concrete

Based on the experience of WSS states, driving change requires a vision that is compelling enough to catalyze action among internal and external stakeholders, concrete enough to operationalize, and broad enough to apply across agencies, disciplines, and programs.[9]

North Carolina's vision that "families will tell their stories once and receive the services they need" was a real shift in how agency and county partners operated and provided a clear picture of how leadership wanted to support struggling families. County leaders, caseworkers, and policy staff each saw their place in the state's vision, which inspired changes to daily practice. Counties in North Carolina have adopted a "universal caseworker" model for new applications; instead of customers having to meet with a separate caseworker for each program, they meet with a single caseworker who helps them enroll in all programs for which they are eligible. Policy staff supported the vision by creating a policy governance board to align policy across programs and support integration at the local level.

Vision sets a direction and maintains forward progress.
Agency leaders can identify a clear set of action steps to address underlying problems, but without a vision that drives creativity and determination, innovation can end after the to-do list is complete or staff may revert back to old habits at the first setback or failure. With a well-communicated vision that permeates through an agency, leaders can ensure that decisions across their agency reflect a common goal and prioritize changes that move the vision forward.

Align the vision to agency values and institutional structure.
Leaders in public service must take their political and social context into consideration. A vision for change and a message that appeals to shared values will resonate with internal and external stakeholders. Idaho, a state that strongly values work and personal responsibility, focused their messaging on how work supports that focus on a family's employment stability is good for everyone. Efficient service delivery is good government and helps struggling working families make ends meet and access benefits, in comparison with the more common service delivery systems that are complicated and siloed.

While the vision involves thinking big and identifying lofty goals that may sharply contrast with current circumstances, it must also be compatible with institutional structure. South Carolina's vision was "No Wrong Door," which may seem improbable with separate health and human services agencies, separate computers, separate county offices, and separate caseworkers. When the two agencies elected not to adopt strategies like moving to one computer system or joint county offices, state leaders and the WSS team remained committed to the No Wrong Door vision while adopting new strategies. Implementing No Wrong Door spurred development of a shared customer service model and data-sharing agreement between the two agencies. This meant that program applicants could stand in one line and provide verification one time. Agency leaders made tactical choices and

allowed their vision to evolve to fit new circumstances.

3. *Program integration requires collaboration that takes time, relationship building and new infrastructure.*

To build collaboration across agencies or with external partners, start with core shared goals and priorities—taking each other's goals and missions seriously—and establish a shared understanding of the most important opportunities and challenges. When agencies recognize their shared goals for serving families and individuals and can articulate shared values, the benefits of working together become clear. If circumstances allow, start with a small project or goal to build relationships and learn the challenges of collaboration or rebuild trust from past disappointments before taking on a big goal or initiative.

Successful collaboration requires the right expertise, authority, and commitment. Therefore, leadership must make collaboration a priority and ensure staff have the time to work together. When creating a governance structure to support comprehensive systems reform across health and human services, state officials must consider the different types of expertise needed across program areas and disciplines (training, policy, business process, data, and technology) and at each level (from executive to frontline staff). The best people to organize and contribute to collaboration are likely the leaders and experts that are already called upon to do so much. Leaders must either make it explicit that collaboration is a priority that takes precedent over other assignments or reassign work to give staff time to work together.

Rhode Island has leveraged ACA to implement sweeping reforms to integrate health and human services, working toward alignment with health programs and across health and human services. When WSS began, Rhode Island was very siloed; each program had separate technology and caseworkers. The state used ACA funds to integrate computer systems for Medicaid eligibility with the state-based exchange *and* with other work supports like SNAP. While building the technology to support integration, they have also worked to integrate business processes across agencies. With WSS funds, they worked with business process consultants to support their transition to a universal caseworker system for Medicaid and SNAP (each caseworker being able to enroll customers in both programs). The secretary of health and human services remarked that a shared sense of mission helped them move forward *together* to implement lasting changes like new technology, new business processes, and a jointly trained workforce.

State officials at every level can take responsibility to ensure collaboration on the work. While support from above is ideal, it may not be there at the beginning. However, leaders and teams can still commit to structured communication and collaboration within their authority and with colleagues at the same level. The governor can commit to program integration of health and human services at the state level, even if federal policy seems siloed. Program managers may not have decision-making authority, but they can communicate and ensure their work is informed by staff from other programs while waiting for higher-level leadership to come to a consensus. Managers and caseworkers can collaborate across teams to improve customer service at the local level. Everyone should consider collaboration and teamwork part of their shared responsibility.

4. *"Seeing is believing." Draw on peer examples beyond and within your state to drive initial change and to refine your approach as you go.*

When the vision greatly contrasts with the current situation, it may seem too good to be true at first, especially if other good ideas have petered out in the past. Concrete examples from other states or counties can inspire state leaders and their teams, making change easier to visualize and believe in. Giving staff at different levels— including frontline leaders and decision makers—opportunities to engage with others who have implemented

change can jumpstart communication and planning around the vision.[10]

According to WSS states, it has been invaluable participating in a learning community where peers share experiences and problem-solve together. Public service can be lonely for leaders, who need peer interaction and validation that **change is possible**. Peers bring a fresh perspective and camaraderie that keeps staff and leaders motivated to push through setbacks and continue to improve. WSS teams also created opportunities for shared learning across agencies, divisions, and local offices within their states, which was as powerful as the learning across states. Below, we share a few key ingredients to building an effective learning community, as gleaned from peer learning among states as well as peer support *within* states.

- *Skilled or intentional facilitation* to frame similarities and differences will help peers make key connections when contexts differ (e.g., showing county- and state-administered states that they have a lot to learn from each other or helping small rural and large urban offices see their common challenges). Structured conversations on a set of topics that are meaningful to the group will prompt participants to engage more deeply and contribute to the learning process without falling into bragging or complaint sessions.

- *Long-term connections* built through regular contact between peers over time helps foster deeper engagement. Integrating and aligning across systems is a long-term commitment that requires lasting connections with and support from peers to stay motivated, hear fresh ideas, and bounce back from failure. Over the past four years, WSS states have used formal conference calls or site visits and informal discussions to share strategies and support one other in aligning redetermination periods across programs, managing relationships with vendors, writing new curricula for leadership and management training, and countless other strategies/innovations.

- *Senior-level leaders need to value and support* peer engagement and empower staff to make it a priority. For example, North Carolina and Illinois used WSS funds to regularly hold statewide conferences, meetings, and planning sessions bringing together local/county leaders. In South Carolina, staff from the Office of County Operations in the Department of Social Services held weekly calls with managers statewide.

Putting the Pieces Together

The WSS states made changes to many different parts of their systems: policy, business processes, technology, data, management practices, and their procedures for handling renewals as well as new applications. WSS states learned that each of these areas needed to be examined and re-examined over time to ensure customers' experiences lived up to the states' visions. As each state implemented early actions or consulted with peers, they discovered more and more pieces of the systems reform puzzle. Changes in one area often had implications for other areas; information systems affected the business process and improved data led to policy changes. For example, Rhode Island learned that their requirement for child care applicants to submit detailed work schedules was causing major delays, especially for customers with fluctuating schedules or non-standard work schedules. When the technical assistance group pointed out that this was not a *federal* requirement, Rhode Island eliminated their own requirement for a detailed work schedule. Rhode Island credits this policy change, along with business process changes, as responsible for dramatically increasing their timeliness in processing applications.[11]

States also learned that when policy changes, it is critical to provide guidance and training to counties or local offices on how to implement those changes in daily practice to ensure that customers' experiences do not widely vary between local offices or caseworkers. Every office should define their business process in clear, written form to guide their daily operations and management. Struggling families need simple, transparent processes that don't change from person to person or day to day.

5. *Seize existing state authority to align and streamline policy.*

When WSS states set out to integrate policy across programs and make service more family-centered, they realized they had more flexibility to set policy than they previously thought. States often had the authority to change rules that impeded progress.[12]

States have noted that WSS core goals—to increase access across programs and reduce the administrative burden of running programs—gave them a new framework with which to approach policy reform. All six states have implemented changes so that families can apply simultaneously for Medicaid and SNAP.[13] States met the requirements of the Affordable Care Act and maintained a commitment to program integration. A few accomplishments for WSS include (WSS evaluation reports provide full findings; see reference page):

- **Integrated applications.** *Families can apply for multiple programs at once and have more options for how to apply (online or via phone).* For example, Colorado's integrated online application for SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, and child care assistance, called PEAK, has a smart-technology feature. "Am I Eligible" can screen applicants for and inform them of other programs for which they may be eligible. For more examples of technological innovations from WSS states and others, see State Innovation in Horizontal Integration: Leveraging Technology for Health and Human Services[14].

- **Verification policy.** *Every piece of paper a customer submits must be processed by a caseworker, so streamlining verification policies can both improve the customer experience and increase efficiency.* There are multiple ways to simplify the verification process, including: allowing self-attestation when allowed under federal law; clarifying verification policy at the local level; aligning income definitions across programs; fully utilizing electronic data matches; and sharing customer information across programs. In some situations, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare has implemented an automated (no-touch) eligibility process for Medicaid, checking Social Security and Idaho Department of Labor interfaces to confirm ongoing eligibility. Customer or caseworker intervention is only required to resolve data discrepancies or when the information indicates a change in eligibility.[15]

- **Using SNAP eligibility information for Medicaid enrollment.** *WSS states have also verified Medicaid eligibility using information that customers provided for SNAP.* In South Carolina and Illinois, tens of thousands of children and adults have been automatically deemed eligible for Medicaid based on information already on file for SNAP. South Carolina used the express-lane eligibility (ELE) option to maintain Medicaid health coverage for more than 140,000 children without the need for families to contact the Medicaid agency or complete any Medicaid paperwork.[16] Illinois enrolled 40,000 non-elderly, non-disabled individuals in Medicaid based on SNAP receipt using one of five targeted enrollment strategies provided by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in May 2013.[17]

- **Child care policy simplification.** *States also made changes to simplify policy within a program as well as aligning across programs.* The Idaho team redesigned their co-payment structure for the child care assistance program. Working parents participating in the child care assistance program are required to contribute to the cost of child care. Idaho implemented a simplified co-payment for child care. Initially the change was met with some confusion, but after understanding the misconceptions, Idaho quickly redesigned their communication to explain the change. The redesigned communication makes it dramatically easier to explain the amount that participants must pay providers, and makes budgeting for the family easier with child care monthly costs that are consistent and predictable.[18]

Make policy alignment a priority.

States need a structure or process for policy experts with deep knowledge in individual programs to work *together* to identify opportunities for alignment across programs and determine how policy changes in one program will affect others. Specifically they must determine how changes will impact families who are eligible for multiple programs and the way local offices administer these programs. NC-Department of Health and Human Services has institutionalized a cross-program policy governance board to ensure that before implementing policy change in one program, experts from other programs weigh in on potential effects across programs. This group also sends policy proposals to county leaders to get feedback from leaders directly responsible for administering the programs. Frontline leaders send feedback on whether proposed policies are clear and identify anticipated challenges to implementing policy changes in their counties.

Be intentional about policy implementation.

While streamlining and integrating policies is a key step toward comprehensive reform, policy change must be supported with changes to business practice and training. Without business process guidance and a clear vision for service delivery, local office managers and staff implement policy based on interpretation, which can lead to a fragmented service delivery system where policy and practice do not consistently match. In addition to training, also consider the role of technology and data. Frontline supervisors and staff need the tools to implement new policies, which may require new technology to support changes or new performance measures to assess whether policy changes are being implemented as intended.

6. Redesign business processes to reduce delays in processing and support program integration.

The importance of policy and technology may be intuitively obvious to state leaders and stakeholders; if nothing else, they see the constraints imposed by overly complex rulebooks and aging systems. However, the importance of "business processes," the actual steps a local office takes to process an initial application or review continuing eligibility, is often less obvious. State leaders, as well as frontline staff and supervisors, can grow accustomed to any process—no matter how cumbersome. Eventually, they start to believe they are doing the best they can with limited resources.

WSS states proved that reforming dysfunctional local office processes can deliver significant results. Cumbersome business processes include unnecessary steps that create long periods of delays with pending applications. Systematically examining these processes to squeeze out duplication and delay using any one of a number of methodologies now widely available can make an enormous difference. It can also improve staff morale; rather than constantly dealing with angry customers and huge backlogs, staff can focus on connecting with customers, meeting their needs, and understanding policy, which is the core role of casework.

Several of the WSS states **set same-day service as a goal**. Administrators in Idaho Department of Health and Welfare explain their commitment this way: "Customers come to us for an eligibility decision and we want to do everything we can to give them that decision at our first contact." By providing same-day service, states are resolving customers' needs at the earliest possible point and eliminating interactions that are not necessary to connect customers to the services they need, saving staff time and state resources.

For example, in local/county offices, the eligibility process generally follows this sequence of steps:

| Customer submits application to office. | → | Agency sends appointment. | → | Customer interviews, receives list of required documentation. | → | Customer submits documents. | → | Agency processes application. |

Same-day service collapses weeks of work (with lots of pending time) down to one day.

| Customer submits application and meets with caseworker. | → | If all customer information is verified, caseworker processes case same-day. |
| | → | Caseworker processes case at a later date only if all customer information cannot be verified same-day. |
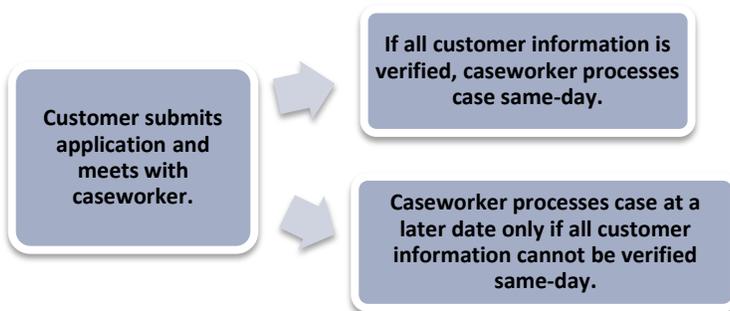
To increase the number of customers that receive same-day service, WSS states used these strategies:

- *Meet customers' needs while they are present in the office or on the phone*: Instead of customers dropping off their applications and getting an appointment for later, ensure caseworkers have time (or have dedicated caseworkers available) to review and process their applications while they are present or on the phone.
- *Reach out instead of scheduling an appointment*: Instead of immediately sending an appointment time to customers who apply online or mail in paper applications, cold call these applicants for phone interviews, scheduling interviews only when caseworkers don't reach them.
- *Simplify the verification process for caseworkers and customers*, instead of requesting documents from the customer. To accomplish this:
  - Use electronic sources of information in real time.
  - Use collateral contacts; make phone calls to verify customer information instead of waiting for paperwork.
  - Don't over-verify; make sure caseworkers only request required documentation.
  - Don't duplicate; don't ask customers to provide the same verification multiple times for different programs.

Using these strategies, many cases or customer requests can be resolved same-day. It may seem counterintuitive to take time with every case and complete the process when customers are lined up out the door and the backlog is piling up. But local/county offices that take in applications and renewals without completing the process are actually piling on more cases that will further clog the system.

Consider a full range of work flow options as well as alternative approaches to assigning work to caseworkers. There is no single best practice.
While business practices at the local level varied by state, most states paid considerable attention to case assignment. For instance, in Illinois, local offices experienced overwhelming caseloads as high as 2000. In some states, families stood in multiple lines and with long waits to see multiple caseworkers. Clearly, states needed a new approach to case assignment. To make their own processes more efficient for customers, North Carolina and Rhode

Island shifted to universal caseworker models, where a single caseworker processes applications for multiple programs.

Drawing on the experiences of these six diverse states, we outline below some of the questions and options with which they grappled based on their state context.

How to assign work to caseworkers?

Approaches to Assigning Casework			Considerations
Case-based workflow: Caseworkers are assigned a group of cases for which they process eligibility and manage all tasks.	**Task-based workflow:** Supervisors assign work (or use a workflow management system) to caseworkers based on the next task to complete or next customer to serve.	**Hybrid workflow:** Case-based workflow for some functions or programs like SNAP/TANF Employment and Training cases, where sustained relationships with customers and providers are essential to meeting case management goals. Other cases or functions are task-based.	To support same-day service, managers must ensure that caseworkers' workload is manageable enough to allow time to completely resolve each case or task they initiate. In any workflow option, train managers to ensure they have the skills to effectively manage the workflow and support same-day service.
Universal caseworker: caseworkers provide case management for multiple/all programs.	**Specialization by program:** caseworkers process eligibility for a single program; customers applying for other programs will see another caseworker.	**Hybrid approach:** Universal caseworkers for some programs while particular programs or functions are assigned to specialized caseworkers. For example, Long Term Care cases are handled by caseworkers with specialized training.	With a universal caseworker model, having one caseworker help customers with multiple programs can be more efficient for customer and state agencies. Integrated eligibility system can add more efficiency because caseworkers are not duplicating work by entering customers' information into multiple systems.

Having central units to complete some tasks?

Two Approaches to Centralization		Benefits and considerations
Centralization by task: Moving some aspect of the eligibility process from local office responsibility to central units that cover the work statewide. ID-DHW created six central offices: one call center; one mail processing center; and four processing centers.[19]	**Centralization by program:** Moving eligibility process for a program(s) from local office responsibility to central units that handle that program(s) for the state or region.	States that opt for centralization by program should consider how to maintain same-day service and program integration. If a customer visits an office, can they apply for multiple programs in one visit or receive same-day service if one or more programs are not processed in the local office?

States should not approach Business Process Redesign (BPR) as a short-term initiative or an event.
WSS states have shared that the same guidance, training, and coaching required to successfully launch change must be institutionalized to support continuous improvement and build skills over time.[20] Working with local leaders and management staff to develop new procedures is the first step; successfully implementing new procedures requires that local leaders and supervisors have the skills to manage the work in a new way. If state leaders bring in vendors

or project management staff, as some WSS states have, to get started, the state also needs local leaders and staff in house who have the skills to drive change and who will be responsible for continuing and sustaining business process improvements over time.

7. Design or refine technology to serve your vision, not the other way around.

All six states launched new or significantly modified eligibility systems during WSS. In some cases, these were previously planned systems; in other cases, states were forced to change by ACA requirements, or seized the opportunity presented by increased federal matching funds to replace obsolete systems. These modernized systems created excellent opportunities to share data across programs and streamline caseworkers' efforts.

At the same time, multiple WSS states highlighted the need for state leaders to be savvy with technology to ensure it meets their needs and supports their vision. They urged states to enter the design or procurement process with a clear sense of purpose and direction instead of relying on vendors to dictate the role of technology. Leaders should clearly *communicate* how they expect technology solutions to support their vision for customer service. Further, the design or procurement process should be driven by states' overarching goals to improve customer service, implement new business processes, align policy, and/or develop user-friendly data.

Practical examples from Idaho and Illinois illustrate how new technology can support comprehensive systems reform. The Illinois team shared that WSS-inspired business process redesign and program integration initiatives helped prepare them to implement the large-scale technology reform required by ACA. In 2011, with dedicated staff and resources from WSS, IL-Department of Human Services began working with pilot offices to implement new procedures. After working on local pilots for two years, they had clear goals for improving frontline practice and customer service. They also understood the challenges that were standing in the way and had ideas about how technology could help. The team kept those lessons in mind while designing an integrated eligibility system. Lessons from business process redesign also helped them anticipate the magnitude of resources and training required to implement reforms at the local-office level.

On a recent site visit in Idaho, leaders at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare shared with their peer states why their business process solutions always precede the development of new technology. They believe that **comprehensive, large-scale system reforms predicated solely on new technology will fail.** Idaho implements policies and procedures that match their vision before seeking technology changes to support it. While this may take longer, state leaders are committed to "having the right technology at the right time; technology solutions that do not support business priorities are the wrong solution."

In launching new technology, failure is frequent. Be prepared.
Many of the states launching new systems experienced delays. A few experienced major problems at launch. In the context of ACA implementation, these challenges received an unprecedented amount of public and media attention. One human services secretary in a WSS state advised tempering expectations, even if state leaders expect the perfect launch for new technology. "Don't oversell and fall short." Another state's team advised having contingency plans and proactively communicating with all stakeholders about the potential for delays and technology glitches. States recommended building in extra time for testing systems, although they acknowledged that given internal and external pressures, it may not always be an option to slow down implementation in order to increase the chances of a successful launch.

Idaho's advice to maximize improvements may sound contrary: **fail fast**. This can mean implementing small-scale changes first or incrementally launching discrete technology changes over time, such as phasing in programs or new functionality. If a small or incremental change is not possible because of a deadline, leadership priorities, or

external pressure, then **fail fast**; monitor new technology closely and be prepared to quickly identify issues and make adjustments. By quickly responding to what does not work, progress on what does work comes much faster.

8. *Use data as a basis for problem solving and decision making, focusing equally on building a data-friendly culture and developing new and better metrics and reports.*

WSS Director Olivia Golden frames the advice above by identifying three data capacities: **1) getting it**; **2) understanding it**; and **3) using it**. Many states focus on the first capacity—creating highly technical reports, which can be expensive and time-consuming—but neglect building the second and third capacities—ensuring staff at every level understand how to use data to make decisions and monitor performance.

When data are connected to vision, conversations become customer- and family-centered. SNAP and Medicaid participation rates won't just be numbers; they'll instead indicate whether families are accessing the full package of benefits for which they are eligible. The new set of questions may be: How quickly do families get benefits? How much delay do they experience between each step of their process? How many eligible families have their cases closed for administrative reasons and experience churn at redetermination? How are customers' experiences and access to programs changing over time? Are we providing consistent customer service no matter which office someone walks into? Data should be used to illustrate and examine customer service and the agency's impact on families.

Don't think about data in a one-dimensional way. Obtaining customer feedback or pulling data on a small sample of cases can indicate progress along the way when more comprehensive reports are not available. While these are not precise data points, they can indicate progress as well as reveal where reforms should be targeted.

> "Data is all around us…at our fingertips if we think about it differently."
>
> ~ Alicia Kone, Kone Consulting, WSS Technical Assistance Provider

Some short-term strategies that states used to access data include:
- Create a data dashboard that aggregates currently available data in a simple format.
- Use a white board to post and track key data points for local/county offices or teams.
- Survey staff (learn about potential quick wins or how training is going).
- Pull a sample of cases to review monthly (to get a sample of churn or same-day service).
- Survey customers in the waiting room (ask what they are in for and how long they've been waiting).
- Use a log or simple spreadsheet to track the nature and origin of customer complaints.

Three tips from WSS states for developing comprehensive reports in the long-run:
- Include the data, research, information management, and technology experts while developing a new vision and direction for the organization (not just in meetings about data). This helps to ensure that data-informed decision making is part of the overall culture. It also brings needed expertise to the table as state leaders brainstorm what data and performance metrics will be needed to monitor progress as they implement policy, business process, and technology reforms.
- Data to inform problem solving and decision making must be available at each level: state, local/county, supervisor, and caseworker. Doing so allows for targeted inventions to improve business processes or provide additional training.
- Create reports that inform both problem solving and decision making with two types of data: 1) data on desired outcomes; and 2) data on policy or business processes implemented to achieve the desired outcomes. If the desired outcome is a higher percentage of customers who receive same-day service, the

performance measure to track is how often caseworkers use electronic data matches to verify customer information in real time.

Balance creating the right data reports with preparing for data. Incorporate data into leadership development or training to ensure leaders and staff at all levels have the skills to understand and use reports. Start with baseline conversations about what data means, with straight-forward examples of how state and local leaders will use data for decision making. Coaching through practical conversations and examples is extremely important in states where program managers and local leaders have run programs for years without using data to inform their management practices and decisions.

Building skills and coaching managers at different levels to use data to problem solve and manage must be coupled with support and accountability for getting results. For example, in Idaho, state staff held weekly meetings with local supervisors to review the performance measures required from every office. These conference calls started out "top down," where state staff reviewed reports, explained data points, and reviewed expectations for how frontline supervisors should manage with data. As they became confident in their knowledge and comfortable with data, frontline supervisors began to lead these meetings—reviewing reports, providing feedback, and coaching their peers on how to use reports in their management practices.

Data and performance measures can be used for accountability and to support learning and transparency, a theme highlighted by Idaho, Colorado, and others**.** Senior officials in Colorado see data as an opportunity for open conversations about how reforms are being implemented at the local level. State staff identify the areas where counties are struggling and ensure they have assistance. One county manager commented that meetings to review data are "not just smack downs." The state agency offers technical assistance with useful tools to improve. Pam Loprest, WSS evaluation team lead, observed that "while data can be used to judge performance, the best performance management systems are feedback loops where the assessment of performance is connected to discussions on how to make improvements."

9. Equip local leaders and frontline supervisors with the skills to lead change and manage new processes.

When we asked WSS states about their most important next steps to sustain the reforms they've implemented over the past four years, at the top of their list multiple states had ensuring that managers have the skill needed to lead change and manage in a new and changing environment. Professional development was part of reform initiatives in each state. States recognized the need to equip local leaders and frontline supervisors with the skills to manage new workflow, use data to guide daily decisions, and coach caseworkers as they adjust to new technology or policy.

In states where professional development for frontline managers had not been prioritized in decades, the existing training approach or curriculum (if any) did not offer the skills necessary to succeed in the current environment. Some states had a narrow approach to management training that did not account for the diverse set of skills required to manage or did not offer local leaders a diverse set of professional development opportunities. States also faced financial barriers. When state budgets are tight and every dollar must be accounted for, the budget for training on "soft" skills like leadership, coaching, and change management can seem difficult to justify. To develop data-driven organizational practices and successfully implement reforms in policy, technology, and business process, state health and human services agencies must update their training approach and curriculum to keep pace with sweeping changes to the rest of the system. Under WSS, states prioritized investments in training and professional development.

WSS states included leaders from training and staff development departments in planning and implementing a new vision for service delivery. This led to new curricula and professional development opportunities that support strong management practices and make successful reform possible. States also addressed skill gaps at the management level by examining whether their hiring practices or promotion criteria reflected the required management skills (not just promoting based on seniority).

> "Managers buy in when they have the tools and training to be successful."
>
> ~ Manager in Larimer County, Colorado

On our closing site visit to South Carolina, senior officials highlighted the need to continually update training based on the skills required to support the agency's strategic direction. States used various strategies to develop skills sets at the management level; over the course of WSS, they developed and adjusted their approaches as new initiatives required new competencies. For example, in the first year of the implementation phase, Illinois worked with TA providers to complete a needs assessment for management training, developed a customized curriculum for management training, and held a statewide "Leadership Institute" that provided local leaders with networking opportunities and professional development sessions. In year two, Illinois implemented ACA and launched the first phase of their integrated eligibility system. Managers were struggling to understand and use the management features in the new eligibility system—assigning cases and monitoring performance—while trying to coach staff on new case management technology. In year three, as local offices struggled with new technology, the agency recognized the need for a consistent approach to managing workflow and using technology. They developed a new, more detailed management strategy on how work should be "organized, tracked, assigned, and monitored" using an integrated eligibility system called WRAP (Worker Resources Allocation and Prioritization). WRAP provides managers with detailed instructions on how to manage workflow and use technology for every case management task in their offices.

10. To keep families connected to a package of benefits, don't solely focus on initial applications; address "churn."

When customers lose benefits due to unsuccessful renewals, they often reapply later because they still need assistance with food, health care, and child care. This cycle of eligible families losing benefits and reapplying is called "churn." Churn clogs the intake process, inflating local offices' workload with applications that are not from new customers. It also causes breaks in benefits, hurting customers' financial stability and jeopardizing their success at work and in school. Indeed, research suggests churn is as big a barrier to receiving benefits as any issue with the initial application process. Taking all this into account, the WSS initiative made reducing churn a core goal.

State agencies can examine opportunities to simplify renewal protocols for caseworkers and program recipients to facilitate more successful renewals. At the WSS kickoff conference, the technical assistance team engaged state teams in an exercise and presentation on churn. Following the conference, Idaho added churn to its data priorities. The state implemented improved data extractions from the eligibility system to monitor levels of churn and initiated improvements with auto-

> ### MEASURING CHURN
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> **The technical barriers to** measuring churn have been a **significant barrier** for many states. **For a deep analysis and advice on defining, measuring, and addressing churn, see** Lessons Churned: Measuring the Impact of Churn in Health and Human Service Programs on Participants and State and Local Agencies, a **report written in coordination with WSS. Also see** Understanding the Rates, Causes, and Costs of Churning in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a report from Urban Institute that was published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

renewals for some Medicaid participants, specifically addressing the procedural reasons for unsuccessful renewals. "Procedural reasons" means that, despite no break in eligibility, households lose benefits because either they or the state fail to follow protocols for a successful renewal.[21] With auto-renewals, the renewal process is less dependent on caseworkers' and participants' actions, which are more prone to error. For example, customers may not receive a renewal notice because they did not report a move or staff might not have processed the change-of-address paperwork before the notice was mailed. By leveraging ACA functionality to check state and federal interfaces, ID-DHW now updates some customers' Medicaid cases without requiring any paperwork or contact with customers.

As in Idaho, the first step is to create a common definition of churn, so measurements and analysis can begin to understand the magnitude of the problem. When agencies and local leaders can see the application volume caused by churn, they may think differently about it. One significant barrier in building consensus to address churn is the tendency for state agencies to see it as a natural occurrence or as the responsibility of program participants.[22] Frontline staff and managers may see a reduction in the volume of cases as a positive sign. They often do not realize that creating a high volume of new applications *is inefficient* when successful renewal of benefits requires less time and resources.

Keeping the momentum

WSS states also recognized the importance of keeping the momentum going after the initial burst of energy. It takes many years and continuous improvements to complete and sustain large, system-wide changes that rely on interlocking reforms (technology, policy, local office business processes, staff training, data capacity, etc.). State government doesn't stand still. Career and political staff frequently turnover; even during the four years of WSS, administrations changed in several states. These changes, combined with new demands and crises, constantly threatened sustained efforts. Consequently, states saw the urgency of finding specific actions that would build reform into their regular work and ensure continuity.

11. Communicate consistently and creatively.

When initiating and implementing large-scale system reforms, make sure staff, customers, community partners, and external stakeholders understand the vision that guides the agency's actions and what to expect next. Be open about the potential for failures and setbacks, reminding internal and external stakeholders that large-scale reform requires long-term commitment while also keeping communications focused on the vision and end goals.

Communication vacuums are likely filled with misinformation.
For state officials with limited resources and high demands on their time, skipping over communication to do "the real work" of implementing new federal mandates, responding to high customer volume, or managing the new crisis each day (the "real work"), is understandable and even expected. Leaders may only be prompted to prioritize communication when a crisis makes doing so absolutely necessary. But lack of communication and guidance can cause staff to act on their assumptions or not act at all, which will exacerbate or create issues. States learned that misinformation and frustration from lack of guidance are difficult to correct and turn around.

Communication about potential setbacks allows local leaders to prepare for and respond strategically to crisis, ask questions, and seek support. Any large-scale reform has the danger of failing or flailing; honest conversation about what can go wrong allows for contingency planning. In 2013, in preparation for the launch of a new computer system to replace a 35-year-old legacy system, Illinois proactively communicated with local leaders. They held webinars to give updates and clearly explained decisions while acknowledging the answers they didn't have. In each region, local leaders held weekly calls where they brainstormed together on potential issues.[23] Local leaders

and frontline supervisors are better equipped to manage through crisis when they have a chance to prepare for system glitches or a slowdown in productivity.

Expand the depth and breadth of communication by a factor of 10
People leading change often underestimate how much communication is needed. This is especially true in public sector agencies, where managers and caseworks are overwhelmed. Just because state leaders are communicating *well* doesn't mean the target audience is hearing the message.

WSS states have said the advice they received to expand the depth and breadth of communication by a factor of 10 was invaluable.[24] To be innovative and relentless in communication, consider whether there are 10 additional modes of communication that would effectively reach target audiences; 10 more audiences that need to hear the vision; and 10 additional messengers to spread the vision for change within and beyond the agency. WSS states have been proactive and creative in communication using strategies including: customer and staff surveys, state wide calls with managers, newsletters, "thermometers" that measure progress on backlog, whiteboards in local offices, daily supervisor huddles in local offices, suggestion boxes for "bright ideas," and video-conference "coffee chats" with state leaders.

12. Promote a culture of transparency and solutions.

When outdated technology, staffing cuts, and scaled-back investment in staff development have been the norm for decades, identifying problems and implementing solutions may no longer be part of the culture. To implement change, leadership must establish a culture of transparency and creative problem solving.

Local leaders are far more likely to engage in open conversation and share their most pressing struggles when they know it will lead to mutual learning, technical assistance, identifying shared goals, and working together to forge a solution. Idaho emphasizes a "problems first" culture at all levels—encouraging staff to bring problems to the attention of leadership. The benefit of elevating problems to senior levels is that leaders have the authority to pool resources from across the agency to address the root cause of the problem, rather than just fixing the immediate symptoms. Senior officials in Idaho also highlighted the importance of leaders taking responsibility for fixing the problems brought to their attention, so that staff have incentive to be open and transparent.[25]

Give managers and staff dedicated planning time away from their hectic daily routines in order to have those tough, honest conversations and begin investigating and addressing the patterns that drive each crisis. Without this dedicated time, they'll be too busy coping with long lines, low staff morale, and dissatisfied customers to uncover the underlying causes. Multiple states used WSS resources to fund statewide convenings, which brought together local/county leaders for professional development and planning in a solutions-focused environment.

Conclusion

Work Support Strategies showed what is possible when states commit to change. Leaders and stakeholders in Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Rhode Island and South Carolina set a high bar: ensuring *all* low-income families get and keep the work supports for which they are eligible. This benefited not only families, but also the states themselves. Streamlining and integrating processes reduced the burdens overwhelming many workers. As the North Carolina team explained, "every piece of paper a family has to fill out is a piece of paper a worker has to process." WSS also showed that, with federal resources to support technology currently available through the Affordable Care Act, this is the moment to create change. States can help tens or hundreds of thousands of families, as well as thousands of workers, at largely federal expense.

Given what we know today, there is no reason for any state—large or small, county-operated or centralized, urban or rural—to live with bureaucratic and outdated service delivery systems that destabilize families and burden workers. But in practice, it can be hard for state leaders and outside stakeholders, such as advocates, to figure out where to start or to find and sustain a path to this kind of hard, steady, operational improvement in the context of the many crises of state government.

The goal of this paper and the Work Support Strategies initiative more broadly is to provide support and insights that enable every state to set and meet its own high bar. Over the coming year, CLASP, Urban Institute, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities anticipate providing materials, webinars, and individual and peer consultation to a widening circle of state leaders and state advocates to achieve this goal. As South Carolina's director of health and human services said four years ago: "By identifying and supporting the spectrum of needs and ensuring individuals and families are able to take advantage of the benefits for which they are eligible, we increase the likelihood that our investment will truly improve the lives of our citizens."

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