By Lauren Hirka

Work from Anywhere: Optimizing Mobile Tools for the New Era of Child Welfare

Think about the last time your phone failed you. Maybe you lost Wi-Fi connection in the middle of using Google Maps and suddenly had to navigate on your own. Or maybe cell service was unreliable and your call got dropped after you'd been waiting on hold for 15 minutes. Frustrating, right?

Now, imagine that same frustration as a child welfare caseworker in an already stressful situation where you need to quickly capture evidence that a child's safety is at risk or complete a service referral form before leaving a family's house. If your technology fails, the situation is no longer just frustrating, but counterproductive to the important work being done.

This scenario underscores a key question that emerges as working from anywhere becomes the norm in child welfare: if mobile solutions provided to caseworkers aren't optimized to work when, where, and how they do, why offer them in the first place?

Mobile Technology that Works the Way Child Welfare Caseworkers Do

Child welfare agencies have had to pivot multiple times over the past year to support and sustain a remote workforce, while enabling caseworkers and clients to connect in new and different ways. Now, agencies must have the right technology in place to mobilize case and client information so that workers can both make sense of it and use it to help others.

User-centric mobile technology should be designed to give a worker exactly what they need when they need it—no more, no less. Looking at this through a child welfare lens, it includes features like:

- **Complete forms from anywhere.** Caseworkers need the ability to immediately get consent, complete safety plans, and make referrals. When forms can be completed with a family, signed electronically, and submitted from a mobile device during a visit, families get services faster and are more engaged because they are collaborating with the worker in that moment.

- **Digitally hand off work.** Facilitating digital collaboration between caseworkers, coworkers, and supervisors is especially helpful for teams working remotely. For example, if a worker can send a form directly to their supervisor to sign and send back, they can minimize delays for the family while helping the agency meet required timeframes for case closure.

- **Autosave progress.** Beyond allowing caseworkers to access all their forms, a mobile solution should also autosave progress. That way a caseworker can start a form in the office or at home and then pick up where they left off once they're with the family, which further helps them streamline services and save their own time for high-value work.

- **Make information easy to capture.** Quickly capturing photos, documents, audio, and video during home visits is critical. Not only should caseworkers be able to easily capture this information using their mobile device's camera, but also categorize it and add notes in the electronic filing structure so other workers or supervisors can easily retrieve the information as soon as it has been captured.

Image via Northwoods

staff spotlight

Name: Brandy Whisman

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Time at APHSA: Since January 2021

Life Before APHSA: Prior to APHSA, I was a Policy Analyst with The Council of State Governments (CSG), serving all three branches of government. At CSG, I had the honor of managing the Medicaid Policy Academy series and assisting on two national task forces: The Future of Work and Healthy States. Prior to CSG, I worked at a small project management firm in Lexington, Kentucky, and have worked as program staff on the Benefit Accuracy Measurement program in unemployment insurance in Kentucky.

Priorities at APHSA: My priorities at APHSA include managing the day-to-day logistics of the FNS Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Education and Training (E&T) National Partnership Grant and providing support to our project partners and members. In this position, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to work directly with APHSA members, thought leaders, and partner organizations.

What I Can Do for Our Members: I'm happy to discuss SNAP E&T and to connect our members so they can engage each other in the discussion about workforce development.

Best Way to Reach Me: I can be reached at *bwhisman@aphsa.org.*

When Not Working: I have three teenagers, two dogs, and two cats, so life can be chaotic at the Whisman house. In my spare time, I run on beautiful Kentucky trails and read voraciously. I'm also a retired roller derby skater, so you may see me rolling by on my skates from time to time!

Motto to Live By: "If you don't like the road you're walking, start paving another!" –*Dolly Parton* **P.**

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Beyond features, consider the following as you think about how to evaluate if mobile tools for child welfare are truly worker-centric and built to provide long-term value:

- **Provide an intuitive user-interface.** Mobile technology should be nonintrusive and designed to display and retrieve information in a way that matches a caseworker's natural conversation style. That way it enhances engagement with families instead of creating barriers.
- **Mobile-first, not just mobile-friendly.** Think about using the Amazon app versus viewing the website on your phone. The app is easier to navigate because it was built for a mobile device. The same goes for child welfare technology. Just making a web-based system or file accessible on a mobile device isn't enough.
- **Advanced security features are built in.** Simply using a tablet to take notes or photos in the field isn't as secure as using a tool that builds in measures like encrypting data at rest and in-transit and syncing data to a hosted solution running on FedRAMP-compliant and HIPAA-compliant services. Additionally, photos should be contained within the application and not live on the device's camera roll.
- **Works regardless of connection or location.** Last, but not certainly not least, mobile solutions should be optimized to work anywhere caseworkers do, especially with families. This includes the ability to fill out forms and capture photos, documents, audio, and video in disconnected mode, as Wi-Fi and cell service are not often reliable. Once the device is connected, all data and information should automatically sync so coworkers and supervisors have access.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, child welfare caseworkers have been resourceful, creative, and unwavering in their commitment to serve families no matter the circumstances.

Just like they continue to put families' needs at the center of their work, vendors and agency leadership should put caseworkers' needs at the center of mobile technology solutions to empower meaningful outcomes in the new era. **P.**

Lauren Hirka is a Product Manager at Northwoods. She sets the long-term vision and strategy for Traverse, Northwoods' content management, data collection, and case discovery solution for child welfare. Lauren has spent hundreds of hours with child welfare professionals to research and develop Traverse from its inception.