



# Alameda County Social Services

*Closing service gaps through better use of information*

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## Overview

### The Need

Faced with new regulations requiring better welfare case outcomes, Alameda County needed to gain a better understanding of case status and program performance.

### The Solution

Alameda teamed with IBM to deploy an information management system that combines entity analytics with business intelligence to give workers an agency-wide, comprehensive view of individual cases.

### What Makes it Smarter

A near-real-time view of cases gives workers deeper insight, enabling service flexibility, avoiding regulatory sanctions and saving money by reducing fraud and waste—such as payment to individuals who are no longer eligible for assistance.

### The Result

“This is a tool that will tell us where things really are and how they are doing, every day.”

— Don Edwards, assistant agency director, Alameda County Social Services

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Many social service agencies face considerable challenges. Program funding is typically hard to get and resources are stretched to the limit as a matter of course—an average caseworker might be serving more than 400 clients at any one time, navigating a maze of overlapping social programs and regulations, and doing his or her best to deliver the right mix of services to get recipients back on their feet. The systems and processes that support these workers are hard-pressed to keep up with the need for information, which means that the agency's understanding of what's happening out in the community may lag weeks or even months behind actual events. In extreme cases, a given client might not be contacted for a year or more. There is a clear potential for waste and fraud.

Seeking to reduce costs while improving the performance of state social programs, the state of California passed a Deficit Reduction Act that included both performance targets and stiff penalties if the targets were not achieved. The Act required that the work participation rate (WPR) for welfare recipients reach 50 percent, and put the onus on county social service agencies to find a way to make that happen.

For Alameda County, reaching that goal would not be easy. A study showed that Alameda had a WPR of only 12 percent—last among California's 58 counties and well below the state average of 22 percent. “We took that result as an indication that our business practices weren't working,” says Don Edwards, assistant agency director of Alameda County Social Services. “Though we do a lot of good work it was clear we had some issues that were hampering our efforts. We were unable to tell where clients were in the social service system. We needed to give our caseworkers direct access to information about their own cases, at the individual case level. We needed faster, better reporting. We needed to give the workers the right information, on the spot.”





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## Business Benefits

- Gives managers and caseworkers a deep, real-time understanding of case and program status, enabling them to find the best assistance programs for each situation
  - Reveals relationships between benefit recipients and programs, helping to eliminate waste, fraud and redundancy
  - Generates reports in minutes instead of weeks or months—allowing caseworkers to apply their expertise by trying “what if” scenarios based on current data
  - Enables direct savings of over US\$11 million through waste reduction
  - Documents performance on a daily basis to comply with regulations
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Another important factor in the need for better, more current information was a funding provision known as Title IV-E. Rather than providing money for individual social service programs directly, Title IV-E provides a block grant that allows Alameda and Los Angeles County agencies to more easily move funding from programs that don't work to those that are more effective. In order to qualify for an IV-E waiver, however, agencies need to generate performance metrics on a daily basis to prove that the allocations are having the desired effect. Current and accurate information was also needed to satisfy philanthropic organizations, which provide a significant portion of the county's funding.

### Finding the right answer

With an extensive background in information technology, Edwards knew what was required, but was having difficulty finding the right tools. When he learned of a proof-of-concept system developed by IBM to serve foster children in San Francisco, though, he was intrigued. “I was excited by the fact that it could not only track people as they move through the system—our basic requirement—but that it also provided analytics that could help my staff make critical decisions on the spot. That business intelligence was an important capability, because it would give us a better understanding of the effects of our actions.”

To bring the goal of the system into clear focus, Edwards put it very simply. “I wanted to give my caseworkers and managers a ‘how am I doing?’ button. I wanted them to walk in every morning, be able to press that button and have the system tell them what's really going on with their cases. It seems straightforward, but it's something we couldn't do and it was important to our success.”

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## Smarter Government:

## Making the most of social service dollars through deeper insight

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**Instrumented** Information about beneficiary and program status is gathered through legacy means, including telephone response, Web site input and in-person interviews.



**Interconnected** SSIRS combines data to provide an agency-wide case view with evaluation capability, tracking individuals and establishing relationships.



**Intelligent** Near-real-time tracking and alerting, combined with analytic capabilities, enables elimination of waste, better control of fraud and abuse, and better compliance with regulations.



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## Solution Components

### Software

- IBM Cognos®
- IBM InfoSphere™ Identity Insight
- IBM InfoSphere Warehouse – Enterprise Edition

### Hardware

- IBM InfoSphere Balanced Warehouse – D5000
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## Enter SSIRS

Alameda County engaged IBM to develop the system that came to be known as the Social Services Integrated Reporting System (SSIRS). It combines IBM InfoSphere™ Identity Insight Solutions with IBM Cognos® business intelligence software and an IBM InfoSphere Warehouse – Enterprise Edition database delivered on a preconfigured IBM InfoSphere Balanced Warehouse – D5000, to create a powerful data warehouse.

InfoSphere Identity Insight is the heart of the system. Alameda County Social Services can not only track benefit recipients, but also recognize and understand the complex relationships between clients and programs—telling workers who knows who and how they're being served. It gives Alameda, for the first time, a complete understanding of each individual's situation, all in one place. This helps the agency ensure that clients are not being over-served and also allows caseworkers to identify programs that might work better for them—both key requirements of Title IV-E.

Cognos gives SSIRS a powerful dashboard capability—the “how am I doing?” button that Edwards described—and also provides an unprecedented level of flexibility and immediacy to reporting. Reports that once took weeks or even months to generate now happen in minutes. This allows the agency to drive waste out of the system very quickly and control fraud much better. Workers know right away if someone has moved or is not complying with program rules.

It wasn't until after the system was already up and running that Edwards gained a true appreciation for its potential. “The synergy between InfoSphere Identity Insight and Cognos is fantastic. One gives us the brains, while the other gives us a smart interface to tap into all that information,” he says. “There's a tremendous amount of ad hoc capability. That gives our caseworkers the tools they need to actually bring their expertise to bear in a timely manner, rather than having to rely on outdated information that no longer reflects the real situation. They know the assistance programs, and they know their clients. Now, they can see how everything fits together and understand all the relationships clearly. For the first time, they can run ‘what-if’ scenarios on the spot and see if there's a better way to handle that case.”

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*“SSIRS is showing us how we can change the way social services are provided for the better.”*

—Don Edwards

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## Making it happen

Money is always an issue for social service agencies, so cost-effectiveness and time to value were critical requirements for SSIRS. “We couldn’t spend years and millions of dollars developing and testing a new data warehouse. We have neither the skills nor the time to build a truly customized system,” Edwards says. “What I was looking for was something prebuilt and essentially off the shelf, where we could put a basic capability in place and get instant value on day one. Then we could start adding capability to it. I didn’t need an end-to-end plug-and-play solution, but I did need to be able to shortcut development.”

Getting agreement for SSIRS from agency administrators was essential, Edwards says. “In my experience, it’s a challenge to bring CEOs and CFOs to the table when you want to talk about technology tools, because technology isn’t their responsibility; it’s mine. You’ll quickly lose their attention when you mention something like a data warehouse. So when I met with management, I didn’t go into the technical details; instead, I put it in terms of business benefit—where we could go if we had it. I said, ‘this is a tool that will tell us where things really are and how they are doing, every day. That’s going to save us millions and make it possible to hit our mandated targets.’ I focused on business productivity and the welfare of our clients. That made it relevant for them.”

Even after the first phase of the project launched, Edwards worked to win over stakeholders to keep it moving forward. “Getting support early on makes the rest of the project so much easier, and to do that I wanted to impress early,” he says. The first component to be deployed was InfoSphere Identity Insight, and Edwards put it on the director’s desktop so she could try it for herself. “Once she got a taste of the things it can do, like uncover and display all the relationships and programs associated with a particular person in seconds, she was fully behind it. There’s nothing like actually seeing it for yourself,” Edwards notes.

A similar demonstration resulted in a major source of funding from The Casey Foundation, a private philanthropic organization with an interest in child welfare and the effect that the Title IV-E waiver would have on outcomes. “Once the Foundation saw for itself how good SSIRS was going to be, it provided the other half of our funding requirements,” Edwards says.



Edwards was so confident in SSIRS that he made a bold prediction to managers. “I told them that if we proceeded, our existing tools would be obsolete before the contract with IBM had run its course. Of course, there were naysayers and they came up with all sorts of contingency plans. As it turned out, I was right; the IBM solution provided information so much faster and more effectively than the old systems that we switched to it a month before I said we would.”

### **Paying off now and in the future**

Soon after SSIRS was launched, IBM and Alameda held a business value assessment workshop to identify opportunities for savings—so-called “low-hanging fruit.” Immediate gains from the reduction of waste in welfare-to-work and child care programs came to approximately US\$11 million. The bulk of this came from elimination of general assistance benefits to ineligible recipients. “Having near-real-time information is tremendous,” Edwards says. “Before, our information was always at least a month old to begin with, and by the time it reached caseworkers it would not only be months old, it would no longer be valid because the situation would have changed. Now, we know when someone has moved or gotten a job so we know right away if they’re still eligible.”

Still more waste reduction and efficiency improvements will come as the system is developed further. For example, there are plans to connect the InfoSphere Identity Insight engine to the agency’s integrated voice response (IVR) telephone system. This will allow SSIRS to determine if a client has not reported in as required and will prompt the IVR to automatically call that person with a warning. If they do not respond, benefits will automatically be suspended—all without using up caseworkers’ time.

“SSIRS is showing us how we can change the way social services are provided for the better,” Edwards says. “It’s not just about making us more efficient, though it’s certainly doing that. It’s helping us reach out to those who need us, making sure they don’t fall through the cracks. It’s about using our resources wisely and effectively to improve people’s lives, better than we ever could before. The more we know, and the more information is shared in a responsible way, the better able we are to get that assistance to those who need it.”

## For more information

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