

Committee On Technology in Government

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Testimony by Kamal Bherwani
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health & Human Services
before the City Council Committee
on Technology in Government
Oversight Hearing on HHS-Connect
Tuesday, June 24, 2008

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairperson Brewer and members of the Committee on Technology in Government. My name is Kamal Bherwani, and I am the Chief Information Officer for Health and Human Services and Executive Director of HHS-Connect. Joining me today are Richard Siemer, Deputy Commissioner and Chief Information Officer from the Human Resources Administration; and from the HHS-Connect team: Christina Valdes, Chief of Staff; Ivy Pool, Acting Operations Manager; Sabrina Smith-Sweeney, ACCESS NYC Director of Training and Outreach; and Joe Fleischman, Project Manager.

Background

As you know, New York City provides a wide range of health and human services to a diverse and complex client population, and many New Yorkers qualify for and participate in multiple programs provided by different agencies. Currently, City agencies are challenged in their ability to share data due to siloed technology systems. Clients experience these silos in many ways, be it by redundant forms, duplicate document requests, or having to stand in multiple lines in various agency offices. Clients often have difficulty accessing critical work supports, while City agencies lack access to crucial client information that would allow for better service delivery.

Success of ACCESS NYC

To address these service issues, in October 2006 Mayor Bloomberg launched ACCESS NYC, an online resource that provides access to 35 different City, State, and Federal benefit programs in seven languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Arabic, and Haitian-Creole. New Yorkers can enter household information to receive a list of the benefits for which they are potentially eligible, print partially-complete application forms, search for office locations, and create an account to access their information at a later time. Since its launch, ACCESS NYC has received over 230,000 visits, and over 47,000 applications have been downloaded. The City has received multiple awards for HHS-Connect and ACCESS NYC, including the 2007 Prize for Public Service from the Citizen's Budget Commission and the 2008 Laureate medal from the Computer World Honors Program; for these programs the City is also a finalist for the 2008 Intergovernmental Solutions Awards, among others. Hopefully you have seen our marketing campaign, which launched this spring with ads on the NYC subway, as well as in check cashing locations in low-income neighborhoods.

Through the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), ACCESS NYC receives funding to provide training and outreach for community based organizations and City agencies. A dedicated, five-person Training and Outreach team is responsible for communications, marketing, training, and technical assistance. The training and outreach team works closely with a network of community-based organizations to promote the use of the website by program staff and clients. To date, over 9,413 people from 259 organizations have been trained on the use of ACCESS NYC. The team also distributes instructional materials in the seven languages that are available on ACCESS NYC. Outreach activities also include a monthly e-newsletter, which is distributed to a network of over 2,000 partners.

ACCESS NYC is now the “anchor tenant” for HHS-Connect. Through the work of HHS-Connect, ACCESS NYC will be expanded to include not only pre-screening for benefits, but also online applications, intentions-based content search functionality, client account management, and other client transactions. ACCESS NYC will become a one-stop shop for all health and human services information and transactions.

Strategic Planning Effort

Building on the success of ACCESS NYC, Deputy Mayor Gibbs launched an intensive eight-week strategic planning effort in September 2007, the goal of which was to develop a Roadmap for leveraging information technology to streamline and coordinate the services provided to the approximately two million New Yorkers who access the City’s health and human services. The strategic planning effort was a priority project for the Administration, with deep involvement from the Deputy Mayor, the HHS Commissioners, and agency staff.

Roadmap

In December 2007, Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs published the “HHS-Connect Roadmap,” an ambitious strategic plan for integrated health and human services. The objective of HHS-Connect is to utilize ground-breaking and innovative technologies to improve the City’s ability to serve its Health and Human Service clients while providing better customer service and online access.

The HHS-Connect Roadmap is a plan for a solution to “connect the dots” between clients, workers, and agencies. The following are the benefits that the roadmap seeks to achieve for these stakeholder groups:

- ***For Clients:*** Building on the success of ACCESS NYC, the City will create the ability for clients to apply online for programs and to view and manage their own information through a client account.
- ***For Workers:*** Caseworkers will have more information about clients at their fingertips, enabling them to spend less time searching for information and documentation, and more time providing front-line services.
- ***For Agencies:*** HHS-Connect will allow agencies to measure outcomes based on a holistic view of clients across agencies and to allocate resources based on need.

The HHS-Connect solution will be based on data integration and exchange among existing systems. Data sharing will provide a more complete understanding of the clients' needs and enable improved service delivery that will ultimately lead to an overall increase in economic self-sufficiency.

In his State of the City address, in January, Mayor Bloomberg announced the creation of the HHS-Connect program. The Mayor noted that in the future, New Yorkers will only have to provide their information to the City once, and it will subsequently be accessed and re-used by agencies.

Additional information will be collected on an as-needed basis, and will be included in a virtual integrated case file, which clients will be able access and update through an online portal. This will not only improve the lives of New Yorkers, it will also reduce the burden on caseworkers, enabling them to spend more time with clients and less time pushing paperwork and manually entering data into various State and City systems.

Overview of HHS-Connect

Governance

One of the first and most important tasks we have undertaken is establishing an appropriate governance structure for HHS-Connect. In January, I was hired to serve as the Chief Information Officer for Health and Human Services and Executive Director of HHS-Connect. In this role, I report directly to Deputy Mayor Gibbs and serve as a member of her Senior Staff. Budget, personnel, procurement, facilities, and other administrative functions are performed by the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) on behalf of HHS-Connect. My office, which has a mix of policy and technology experts, is comprised of a technology and innovation team of full-time City employees, as well as vendor resources under the ACCESS NYC systems integration and project management and quality assurance contracts.

My office is accountable to an Executive Steering Committee, the mission of which is “to provide executive guidance, support, and oversight for HHS-Connect initiatives to ensure their successful development and implementation so that HHS-Connect helps achieve the City’s unified vision for Human Services Delivery.” The Executive Steering Committee members are: Linda Gibbs, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services; Kamal Bherwani, HHS-Connect Executive Director and CIO; John B. Mattingly, Administration for Children’s Services (ACS); Edwin Méndez-Santiago, Department for the Aging (DFTA); Martin F. Horn, Department of Correction (DOC) and Department of Probation; Thomas R. Frieden, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH); Robert V. Hess, Department of Homeless Services (DHS); Neil Hernandez, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ); Alan D. Aviles, Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC); Robert Doar, Human Resources Administration (HRA); Paul J. Cosgrave, DoITT; and PV

Anantharam, Office of Management and Budget. Executive Steering Committee Meetings are held on a bi-monthly basis, and are critical for authorizing and advancing the work of HHS-Connect.

Data Sharing and Client Confidentiality

In support of HHS-Connect, in March 2008 Mayor Bloomberg signed Executive Order No. 114, which establishes the HHS-Connect program and instructs agencies “to consider all data for data sharing, while ensuring compliance with Federal, State, and Local laws and regulations.” City agencies are asked to identify data sharing opportunities, as well as sources and types of data that will further the aims of HHS-Connect. While the goal of HHS-Connect is to facilitate data integration and exchange, we are very serious about protecting client confidentiality. Several work groups have formed as a result of EO 114, including the Health and Human Services Technology Steering Committee, the Policy and Legal Subcommittee, the Security Workgroup, and workgroups focused on enhancing the client and worker experiences.

Current HHS-Connect Project Work

The December 2007 HHS-Connect Roadmap which I described earlier identified certain initiatives for this office to accomplish. To that end, we are currently focusing on five critical streams of work:

- 1) ***Online Applications:*** We will enhance the ACCESS NYC screening tool by providing the ability for a user to apply directly online for certain programs. Our intent is to build and go live with up to three online applications between now and January 2009.
- 2) ***Client Portal:*** Our client portal initiative focuses on creating a single, online destination for the City’s health and human services programs. Enhanced, searchable HHS content, ACCESS NYC screening and online applications will be available through the portal in its first release.

- 3) *Worker Portal*: The first release of the worker portal, scheduled for fall 2008, will provide the ability for qualified agency users to view client and case information held by other City agencies.
- 4) *Common Client Index*: Development and implementation of a Common Client Index, or “CCI” is a foundational technology initiative that will enable the matching of an individual’s profile across multiple City agency systems. The first release of the CCI is scheduled for the beginning of 2009.
- 5) *Document Management*: Scheduled for early 2009, our document management stream of work will provide access to and retrieval of electronic documents stored in HHS agency repositories.

Enterprise Case Management

Concurrent with the development of these foundational projects, HHS-Connect is also building enterprise case management functionality for City agencies upon request. Currently, we are working with the Department of Homeless Services, Administration for Children’s Services (for Child Care and Head Start), Department of Juvenile Justice, and the Department for the Aging.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. With HHS-Connect the City seeks to accomplish a transformation in the human services realm that has never been attempted on this scale, be it in New York City or beyond. We are setting out to “connect the dots” among millions of clients, nine health and human services agencies in the City and other related City, State, and Federal agencies, and thousands of providers. With this transformation, I am confident that we can provide better customer service and increase the efficiency and the effectiveness in the way that we provide Health and Human Services to diverse population groups that we serve. We appreciate the

support the City Council has shown for ACCESS NYC and we look forward to continuing our successful collaboration on this ambitious effort going forward. I will now be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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