REFLECTING ON THE NEXT GENERATION OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS FOR TANF AND RELATED PROGRAMS

A Consensus Statement by Members of the Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance Network (WELPAN)

August 2005

In response to the state flexibility inherent in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, many states redefined the purposes of their programs supported by these funds from simply issuing assistance benefits to promoting the economic well-being of and other socially desired ends for low-income families. This more expansive mission has, among other things, created a need for better program access and service integration. The trend toward cross-program thinking is reinforced by the demands of consumers, advocates, state legislatures, and the federal government for more effective and accountable public services. The current environment of increased effectiveness and accountability requires that states do a better job of delivering integrated and comprehensive services because promoting improved economic and social functioning exceeds the resources and responsibility of any single public program.

While the need for accessible, integrated, and accountable services is apparent, the challenges to implementing these new models are daunting. Critical to our prospects for success is the availability of information systems that can support effective communication among a wide range of assistance programs. Today, however, most state agencies administer human services using multiple “siloed” information systems. This patchwork quilt of information technology for managing billions of federal dollars to provide services and benefits to millions of families is sadly out of step with current demands as well as technical possibilities. Because there are limitations to states acting alone to address these concerns, the members of WELPAN strongly advocate that the federal government take steps to enable states to create the next generation of information systems necessary to manage efficiently the delivery of public welfare services and benefits.

Current demands take several forms. Citizens demand more direct access to information about available benefits and services as well as more direct ability to apply for these benefits and services. With rising caseloads and no additional staff, human service workers demand better and more flexible tools to provide streamlined, comprehensive and individualized services to clients. Meanwhile, current policy and program requirements demand that more and better information be available for accountability and reporting purposes. Consider, for example, the requirements being discussed as part of TANF reauthorization regarding more intricate participation requirements. Some of these requirements may create the need for states to link TANF data with wage record data to measure entered employment; states may also have to report individual-level data on services and benefits to
families not on cash assistance. Yet these and other requirements are being overlaid on old information systems, despite the fact that the technology exists to meet these demands.

States struggle daily with systems that are outdated given the rapid advancements that have occurred in the ten to twenty years since most of our systems were designed and introduced. For example, we can now design integrated systems that make interfacing and integrating information processing possible. It is no longer necessary to have stand-alone systems. Message brokering allows older, but viable, systems to link with other systems to provide more integrated service delivery, while leveraging current investments. New systems can be designed that are more modular and easier to update and maintain as they replace hard coding with tables. Programming in new systems can be more efficient as JAVA is replacing older languages such as COBOL. These advances allow us to consider both customer- and worker-driven applications for services and benefits. In addition, they allow the capture of real-time information for reporting, accountability, and measurement of effectiveness.

Unfortunately, while the possibilities of the new technologies have become increasingly apparent, the ability of states to invest in them has declined, particularly in recent years. As resources have declined, information system requests are increasingly viewed by resource-constrained state legislatures as simply out of the question. In addition, even when resources are made available, states face difficulty navigating the complex environment of vendors that are marketing solutions that may compound problems of communication, compatibility, and service integration. States need assistance to assess the viability of their existing systems and technical architecture so that they can make wise decisions about upgrading, retiring, or replacing their current technology.

States acting alone cannot solve these problems in a comprehensive way. We believe that the reauthorization of the TANF block grant provides an opportunity for the federal government to think about its leadership role in enabling states to create the next generation of information systems to meet the needs of our customers, provide more efficient government services, and assure accountability. Key is the creation of an environment in which states can design and implement the information systems of the future. We believe the federal government can take several steps to assist in the creation of this environment.

First, the federal government should strive to eliminate barriers to the creation of integrated information systems. Several strategies can be pursued in this area. For example, one strategy for achieving this is for the federal agencies that deliver services and benefits through states to work cooperatively with the states to define the core business requirements for the next generation of systems delivering federal benefits and services. A second strategy is to streamline and coordinate the information system approval process. A third strategy is for the federal government to review and coordinate to the extent possible current requirements regarding information security and information access. Because the federal program silos have created very different and often conflicting security requirements for information, serving a single family may require states to deal with as many as five different security systems.

Second, additional financial assistance is needed to support the development and implementation of these technologies. While work continues with states to define the business requirements and critical technologies needed for the future, consideration also needs to be given to designing the federal incentives and cost-sharing arrangements necessary to implement this next generation of information systems. We think that this process could be incorporated into TANF reauthorization legislation and would be justified by the large increase in operational and accountability requirements of the legislation.

Investment in technology should be viewed as an ongoing, developmental process designed to support an ever evolving array of social assistance programs funded federally but provided by states. This investment should not be considered a “one-time fix.” Past efforts that have taken this approach, such as the enhanced FFP for FAMIS systems that is more than a decade behind us, have resulted in systems that have not kept pace with current demands and available technology. What we are asking is for the federal government to work with us to enable us to design, implement, and continuously update the systems of the future.