

Breaking Down Silos to Deliver Coordinated Care

Cloud-based solution helps Sonoma County better leverage data to help citizens in need.

Located in the wine country of northern California, Sonoma County serves a diverse population. Many of its approximately half million residents require safety net services on a regular basis, while others need services in times of crisis, such as in the aftermath of the October 2017 fire that took more than 20 lives and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses in the area.

Even before the fire, agency leaders across Sonoma County's safety net departments recognized they had a large, shared population of individuals who had complex needs. It wasn't enough to simply provide their most vulnerable residents with access to programs and services; providers needed to focus on moving individuals through those systems and into greater self-sufficiency and well-being.

At the direction of the Board of Supervisors, a program called Accessing Coordinated Care to Enable Self Sufficiency (ACCESS) Sonoma County was created. This program involves all the safety net departments within Sonoma County — the departments of Health Services, Human Services, the Community Development (Housing) Commission, the Probation Department, Child Support Services and criminal justice partners — and is designed to provide a more holistic, higher quality of care for individuals in need.

Important components of the coordinated-care program are a multidisciplinary team that includes representation from all safety net departments, a cloud-based technology solution that enables data sharing across multiple silos, and strong governance around policies and procedures related to protecting and sharing private information.

"While the safety net departments recognized the importance of this initiative in advancing care coordination for our most vulnerable residents, there was trepidation about sharing data, given the privacy laws at the state and federal level," says Barbie Robinson, Director of the Sonoma County Department of Health Services. "We worked really hard to identify policies and develop an infrastructure that would allow us to overcome that particular challenge."

Leaders in Sonoma County created the ACCESS program, which involves all of its safety net departments and is designed to provide a more holistic, higher quality of care for individuals in need.

Using the Cloud to Enable Coordinated Care and Location-Based Services

Cloud-based services were essential to integrate disparate data from each department's silo of services to create a single, unified view of each client, develop an individualized treatment plan and enable coordinated case management. In addition, a cloud solution would allow case workers and other team members to access complete, timely and accurate data in the field, as well as provide location-based services through mobile applications on laptops, tablets, smartphones and other devices.

"A lot of our client population is homeless or precariously housed," says Carolyn Staats, Director of Innovation for Sonoma County. "They might be living in a homeless encampment, a shelter or a car. They might be transitioning between temporary housing into more permanent housing. Most of the old solution's siloed systems required those clients to find a way to get to the county facility to obtain a service; we needed place-based services and mobility to meet clients where they were and to effectively coordinate care."

At the heart of the ACCESS solution is IBM Connect360, a data integration hub that brings together data from siloed source systems and uses data management tools to create a single, integrated, up-to-date record for each client (i.e., a master person index). IBM's Watson Care Manager provides multidisciplinary team members with a unified view of the data collected for each person and enables integrated case management — all from a mobile device. To address data privacy concerns, the solution employs a

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secure VPN tunnel between the cloud-hosted user interface and the on-premises systems where private data resides.

Remarkably, using an agile approach, the solution team was able to deliver the ACCESS solution to caseworkers within just 18 weeks. A significant factor in this rapid turnaround time was a two-day training led by IBM.

“We had a non-existent system; we were trying to recover from the fire; and we didn’t have internal subject matter expertise on how to run a multidisciplinary project,” explains Staats.

After the training, the team had a vision, personas of the people typically involved and functional requirements for the new system. With that, they had a starting point for their journey.

Taking Care Management to the Next Level with AI

Another advantage of the cloud-based solution is that it supports advanced capabilities such as artificial intelligence (AI). Current and future use cases for AI are plentiful. For example, the volume of information associated with treating clients with complex needs can easily soar to thousands of pages. Using AI capabilities within Watson Care Manager, IBM worked with the county to develop a tool that screens notes and brings to the surface important factors that are arising with clients. The tool increases efficiency and improves care by helping case managers see items that need to be acted on immediately, as well as urgent issues with specific clients.

This information is from a session in the IBM Government Cloud Virtual Summit, a free, online event featuring 17 sessions with insightful keynotes, illustrative case studies and deep dives into job-critical topics for government leaders. To view any of these sessions, visit www.govtech.com/ibmvirtualsummit

Future use cases include using AI to identify trends and patterns, build predictive models, and improve program services and delivery over time.

Changing Lives One Person at a Time

The story of one individual helps illustrate the outcomes that can be achieved with the new coordinated care model that ACCESS enables. Prior to the catastrophic 2017 fire, one of Sonoma County’s residents had been living in her car. Sandy had a number of physical and mental health needs and would frequently visit the emergency departments at the local hospitals to obtain care. She had been living in an emergency shelter after the fire, but the shelter was scheduled to close. Using ACCESS, the multidisciplinary team was able to coordinate Sandy’s care to obtain permanent housing, lower her prescription drug costs and connect her with a primary care physician as well as behavioral health staff.

According to Robinson, “She still calls people who were involved in coordinating her care utilizing the technology, and she continues to thank us for supporting her journey to self-sufficiency.”

Moving into the Future

One of the program’s goals for the future is to share information about their clients with community providers such as local clinics and hospitals, that also have a high level of interaction with the same individuals. Doing so will amplify the county’s ability to coordinate widespread care and further improve client outcomes. Robinson also foresees using the ACCESS model as a blueprint for other projects, such as one to identify individuals who are at risk for economic insecurity, so the county can proactively mitigate risk and chip away at long-term challenges such as multigenerational poverty.

As Robinson, Staats and other leaders move toward new solutions, they’ll apply important lessons they’ve learned through the ACCESS program. One, garner support from elected officials and leaders in relevant departments. Two, focus on getting to yes and get started sooner rather than later. Three, leverage expertise, schemas and existing resources from other counties that have done similar projects. Four, work with a vendor that has subject matter expertise in the technology and delivery models required to build a solution.

