

## Allen County JFS Increases Efficiency and Reduces Processing Delays with Case Banking and the Northwoods Solution

### At-a-Glance

The Allen County JFS Agency wanted to improve efficiency and reduce the processing delay they were experiencing for new applications.

### Solution

In addition to modifying their case bank processes, the agency also implemented a Northwoods solution featuring Compass Software® document management products including:

- Compass Capture™
- Compass Forms™
- Compass Print Stream Processor™
- OnBase Document Management

### Benefits

- New application processing delay reduced by 64%
- Two clerks now handle incoming mail instead of seven unit support workers and a supervisor
- Saving over 20 cases of paper each month on CAF printing alone
- Additional physical space available due to electronic storage
- Instant access to case documents for agency employees
- Consistent sharing of information between case managers
- Better ability to respond to audits or legal discovery
- Improved employee morale

Like agencies in other counties, the Allen County Job & Family Services Agency (located in Lima, Ohio) was struggling to process applications in a timely manner. Increasing demand coupled with reduced resources made it difficult for the agency to keep up with its increasing workload.

To improve efficiency and reduce the delay for processing applications, the agency developed a two-pronged approach. They moved to a more aggressive case banking model and also contracted with Northwoods to implement an electronic document management solution that would automate some of the mundane tasks that slowed application processing.

The agency's solutions to its backlog did not take long to start showing returns. In November 2008, at the start of the Northwoods project, there was a 90-day wait for the processing of new applications for public assistance. By May 2009, just six months into the project, the agency had reduced the lag time by 64%.

"And we don't feel like we've hit our stride yet," said Caryn Strayer, Deputy Director, Allen County JFS.

### Building Better Processes

Allen County JFS has been using case banking in some form for over a decade. As part of the project to improve its efficiency, the agency decided to consolidate its four existing Income Maintenance and Food Stamps case banks into a single large bank. Medicaid and Healthy Start cases are handled in a separate bank.

In the case bank model, clients are not assigned to a particular case manager but to a group (or bank) of workers for each part of the process. Intakes are handled by a specialized group of case managers and the processing of the applications by another. This specialization provides efficiencies as workers learn to do their jobs faster through repetition. Many agencies using case banking also periodically rotate their employees between specialties to avoid burnout.

At the same time that the agency was implementing a more aggressive case banking strategy, they also began the document management project with Northwoods. The initial goal of the project was simply to eliminate the agency's paper case files, which are housed on location, but it soon became clear that project would solve much more.

"We learned about Northwoods at a directors conference," said Ms. Strayer. "I just thought of it as a way to use less paper. I didn't know that it would help us streamline operations and reduce mail, too."

### Discovery More than Means to an End

At the beginning of the document management project, Northwoods team members met with agency staff to conduct a "Discovery" session. The main purpose of the session is for Northwoods to understand the agency's current business processes, so the document management system can be set up to



best meet the agency’s needs. However, the Discovery process also provides an opportunity for the agency to reexamine its business processes with the help of Northwoods consultants who are familiar with processes at other agencies around the country. Thus, Discovery can help uncover new ways to streamline existing processes at an agency.

“To see on paper what we were doing and redoing was eye opening,” said Kelli Wright, IM Supervisor, Allen County JFS. “Even if we’d have stopped the process there, it would have been worthwhile.”

During the Discovery process, Allen County and Northwoods identified two bottlenecks in the agency’s processes. The first was the way in which mail was distributed. Prior to November, all mail (much of which is documentation to be added to cases) went to a supervisor who separated the documents alphabetically and then sent them on to the appropriate unit support worker. Those workers would then manually fill out an activity task sheet, attach it to the mail items, and add it to the Ready Drawer. The process was relatively slow and tied up a supervisor and seven unit support workers for substantial portions of their workdays.

Now, incoming mail goes directly to two mail clerks (who used to spend their days filing paper). The clerks open and scan the documents, and send receipts to clients for all documents received. All mail is scanned and indexed into the document management system by noon daily. At that point with a simple electronic query, case managers can be sure that any documents received for a case are available and not lying in a pile of unopened mail elsewhere in the building. Mail is now delivered more quickly and efficiently.

The second bottleneck had to do with “Groups.” The agency gathered all clients scheduled for an intake or a redetermination appointment, and put them in a room to view a video of their “Rights and Responsibilities” and their benefit options. During this group session, clerical staff would copy the verifications that the clients brought with them. This process substantially limited the amount

of time an eligibility worker had to interview individual clients, which frustrated the clients. Northwoods Business Analysts recommended that the agency eliminate the group process and have the eligibility workers scan the client documentation themselves during the interview using Compass Capture™. This eliminated the bottleneck, increased the time per day the eligibility worker had to do interviews, and improved customer satisfaction by reducing wait time and congestion in the lobby.

“I think every agency should look at their processes,” said Ms. Strayer. “The easy argument is to keep doing things the way we always have, but the questions should be, ‘Why are we doing it this way?’ and ‘Is there a better way?’ Now we always ask ‘Why?’”

#### **Fear of the Unknown**

A business process improvement and document management project can seem like a daunting undertaking to any agency. It is natural for employees who already feel overburdened to worry that the new system will make their jobs harder. More experienced workers worry that they won’t be able to adjust to the new system or that the technology will be over their heads.

At Allen County, employees had many of the same fears. The agency had never taken on a large technology project (other than those lead by the state), and many agency employees were leery of working with Northwoods. Their fears soon vanished, however.

“We had workers who were scared, and the Northwoods team members were really good at working with them,” said Ms. Strayer. “I worried that some of the people who had been here a long time... that they’d have trouble adjusting. But now they love the new system.”

Many of the fears were caused when workers worried that they would not be able to learn the new system. But once training began and the workers got to use the system themselves, they soon changed their minds.

“It’s an easy system to learn,” said Beth Graff, Quality Control. “And it’s very easy to use.”

*“I think every agency should look at their processes. The easy argument is to keep doing things the way we always have, but the questions should be, ‘Why are we doing it this way?’ and ‘Is there a better way?’ Now we always ask ‘Why?’”*

Caryn Strayer  
Deputy Director

### Serving the Client

Another goal that Allen County had for the document management project was to reduce the time spent in client interviews. The longer interviews last, the fewer clients a case manager can serve in a day. Prior to the start of the project, reapplication interviews at the agency took an average of 60 minutes. In just six months, case managers have shaved 20 minutes off that time and are now averaging 40 minutes per interview. One case manager even reported conducting a full interview in 18 minutes. The agency expects the average to drop still further as they refine the process and case managers become more accustomed to the software. Their ultimate goal is 20-30 minutes per interview, and they are working on a new initiative to help them reach that goal.

The Northwoods solution is helping Allen County reduce the average interview duration in several ways. Using a software tool called AppEnabler, case managers can now look up cases in CRIS-e, the state case management system, click on the screen, and retrieve all of the relevant documents associated with that case.

“App Enabler helps so much with intakes, because now you just click on the case and you have all the documents right there,” said Ms. Strayer. “It saves a lot of time finding information. All existing enumerations are already scanned in before interviews.”

One of the key interview tasks, and the most time-consuming, is filling out forms. Under the old paper-based model, case managers had to manually fill in multiple forms per client, often entering and re-entering the same information on form after form. The Northwoods solution to this issue is Compass Forms™.

“The biggest savings during interviews comes from Forms,” said Ms. Wright. “Being able to pre-fill demographic information saves case managers a great deal of time.”

With Compass Forms, case managers can fill in a client’s name, Social Security Number, or case number; perform a quick search; and let the software complete any fields in the form or group of forms that call for data contained within

the agency’s database. This takes much of the drudgery out of the interview process and actually improves the service the clients receive. Since case managers no longer are tied up entering repetitive information on form after form, they now have more time to talk with the client and still complete the interview faster.

“Clients love the new system and comment on how much faster the process is for them now,” said Ms. Strayer.

### Saving Trees

Prior to implementing the document management system, Allen County printed a 40-50-page Common Application Form (CAF) for each client interviewed, or about 2,500 CAFs a month. The CAF was simply stored away in the physical file. The agency had to print the entire document every time, because CAFs are generated by CRIS-e and printed from a state server that sends the document directly to a printer at the agency.

Today at Allen County, Compass Print Stream Processor™ creates an electronic document from the CAF transmission and stores it to the DMS database. The clients signs the CAF electronically, then the case manager gives the client a pre-printed, 3–4 page rights and responsibilities packet and a printout of the signature page from the CAF. The rest is stored electronically in the DMS. That’s a savings of over 100,000 sheets (20 cases) of paper every month. At \$50 a case (and not including toner and other printer costs), that’s a cost savings of \$1,000 a month just for CAF printing.

### Quality Control

Under the old system, when audits of cases were to be performed by the agency or the state, the physical files had to be pulled (usually by the case manager). When the agency or state needs to audit cases now, locating them is much easier. Rather than hunting down a paper file, all documents related to a case can be found instantly through a simple query of the document management system. In addition, by using Form Groups in the Compass Forms software, case managers are far less likely to forget to complete a form. Each Form

*“I definitely see an improvement in the quality and completeness of cases. Case managers no longer leave out forms, because the system automatically launches the forms they need for a given process. Cases are cleaner and more organized.”*

Beth Graff  
Quality Control

*“It’s amazing. We’ve never been where we are today. We’re seeing better numbers without paying overtime.”*

Kelli Wright  
Income Maintenance Supervisor

*Northwoods is a software development and services company dedicated to helping Human Services agencies meet state and federal performance standards, improve customer service levels and staff morale, and dramatically reduce agency operating expenses. Headquartered in Dublin, Ohio, Northwoods serves more than 70 agencies in five states.*

Group automatically launches all of the individual forms associated with a specific process. The specialization of employees under the case banking model also serves to reduce errors because staff are working the same processes for much of their day.

“I definitely see an improvement in the quality and completeness of cases,” said Ms. Graff. “Case managers no longer leave out forms, because the system automatically launches the forms they need for a given process. Cases are cleaner and more organized.”

Audits and reviews can now sample a more random group of cases. When case managers had to pull files for review, they generally knew which ones would be reviewed. At Allen County, the agency checks a portion of the cases for each worker and 100% of the cases for new or probationary workers.

### **Doing More with Less**

The economy is a double-edged sword for Human Services agencies. At a time when demand is going up, fueled by high unemployment, budgets are shrinking. Allen County has been able to add only four new staff members since June 2007, though they’ve lost many more than that through retirement and attrition.

Despite the lower staffing levels and incorporating a number of recent changes required by the state, the agency is finding that they are able to serve their clients as well or better than before implementing the new case banking model and the document management system. They have been able to reduce their lag time for processing new applications by two-thirds.

“It’s amazing,” said Ms. Wright. “We’ve never been where we are today. We’re seeing better numbers without paying overtime.”

Before the project, agency staff had their hands full just keeping up with the workload. Today, despite the high volume of clients, they are not feeling quite as pressured.

“It’s given us a little more flexibility,” said Ms. Strayer. “We’re now able to look ahead and start initiatives like the Fast Track program.”