from our partners

By Jon Eakins

Navigating the Unwinding in Ohio Through Policy, Practice, and Technology

We first talked about "the mountain of work that has yet to come" in the August 2020 issue of *Policy & Practice*. "The unwinding" didn't have a name yet, but its shadow was already looming.

Since then, agencies have been hard at work finding efficiencies, streamlining administrative work, and getting plans in place to make sure no person or case slips through the crack when the time comes. We've been fortunate to work with the Ohio Department of Administrative Services on a couple of their initiatives:

- Since July, Ohioans can apply for child care assistance through the same form they use to apply for Medicaid, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). That form, regardless of how or where it's completed, gets stored in Ohio Benefits, the standardized statewide case management system.
- All workers across child care, Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF can see each client's verification documents, no matter who collected them, through the shared Ohio Enterprise Document Management System (EDMS). This gives workers across all program areas access to the relevant documents they are authorized to view regardless of how they come into the state.

Bringing child care into the same case management and electronic document management systems as Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF has many benefits that will help the state navigate the unwinding.

"It is very helpful to have things in the same system," said Diane Sunagel, program administrator at Lorain County Department of Job and Family Services (JFS). "The combined application allows clients to apply for child care more easily and reduces the administrative burden of applying for benefits in general."

Some additional results of the unified system:

- **Less duplicate work.** Even though child care workers often need to collect the same verification documents as their counterparts in Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF (think pay stubs or driver's licenses), they were previously siloed in a different system and couldn't see when this information already existed. Now, since everything is in one spot, workers can be more efficient. There's greater awareness around what clients need and what actions have been taken in other program areas.
- **Focus on high-value work.** When workers don't have to focus their time and energy on collecting information that already exists elsewhere, they can put more effort toward answering questions, communicating with clients, and prioritizing customer service.
- **Impact on timeliness.** The one-touch process for real-time eligibility

Illustration by Chris Campbell

determination through Ohio Benefits and Ohio EDMS results in more consistent case-processing timelines. Now that workers can see everything clients are applying for at the same time, they can make sure requests for additional verification are sent out to process applications as soon as possible.

■ **Versatility with staffing and training.** Many agencies in Ohio leverage case banking or have the same workers handling multiple programs due to staffing shortages. Training can be simplified when workers only have to learn one system and process. This also allows agencies to have more flexibility as needs ebb and flow—for example, SNAP or TANF workers can help process child care applications, and vice versa, when there's an overload of a certain type of application coming in but not enough workers to handle it.

Ohio EDMS and the Child Care Shortage

Of course, preparing for the unwinding isn't the only challenge in Ohio. Earlier this year, Public News Service shared poll data from Groundwork Ohio confirming the child care crisis is undermining the stability of many households in the state.[1] Lorain County JFS also noted a year-over-year increase in people applying for child care assistance. Rising costs, limited providers, and staff shortages are well-established causes of the crisis. But administrative roadblocks are also worsening the problem.

With broad access to all the documents stored in Ohio EDMS, child care workers can spend less time tracking down information and more time on things like finding and licensing new providers that could help mitigate the current provider shortage. Having systems and technology in place to make child care workers feel more supported can also help keep them in their jobs longer to lessen staffing issues.

Lessons Learned

Ohio's story demonstrates how improving cross-communication between programs through policy, practice, and technology can help Lorain County JFS and other agencies across the state manage the ripple effects of the unwinding. The system not only helps workers process applications faster, but also provides greater awareness of clients' challenges to ensure quality within each case and facilitate better decisions about allocating resources.

States should be doing everything they can to reduce friction in application processes, boost collaboration between programs, and double down on technology that raises awareness of applications, verifications, changes, and workers' observations. Doing so will allow workers to focus on helping clients address barriers to their success. **P**

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Reference Note

1. *https://www.publicnewsservice.org/ 2022-01-26/livable-wages- working-families/childcare-crisis- ohio-parents-at-tipping-point/ a77557-1*