

# STREAMLINING BUREAUCRACY

## 2005 COMPUTERWORLD HONORS CASE STUDY

### GOVERNMENT & NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

THE ALAMEDASOCIALSERVICES.ORG WEB SITE SERVES THE STAFF AND CLIENTS OF THE ALAMEDA COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY, PROVIDING MISSION-CRITICAL INFORMATION SUCH AS CHILD ABUSE REPORTING TOOLS, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES, FORMS, TIMESHEETS, TRAINING INFORMATION AND ONLINE CONFERENCING TOOLS. [20055246]



Robert Carrigan,  
Chairman of the Chairmen's Committee

Ron Milton,  
Vice-Chairman of the Chairmen's  
Committee

Dan Morrow,  
Chief Historian

### SUMMARY

The AlamedaSocialServices.org Web site serves as an information portal for the staff and clients of the Alameda County Social Services Agency. The site contains mission critical information such as child abuse reporting tools, policies and procedures, forms, timesheets, training information and online conferencing tools. By enabling non-IT program staff to quickly and easily update over 35,000 pages of Web site content the Agency has dramatically streamlined government bureaucracy.

### APPLICATION

The Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) is charged with promoting the social and economic wellbeing of individuals, families and communities in Alameda County. This California County includes Oakland, Hayward, Berkeley and other large cities.

The Agency's staff members are responsible for meeting the needs of the county's 1.5 million residents. The Agency has an active caseload of 175,000 people, each of which receive services in one or more of the following areas: Child Welfare, Adult Protection, Public Assistance, Food Stamps and Welfare-to-Work. Distributing information to this large client base as well as nearly 2,000 staff members is a daunting task. This is especially true in the city of Oakland, which is the nation's most culturally diverse city.

Early information distribution efforts relied on paper-based methods. Examples include distributing hardcopy policies and procedures to all staff, sending hardcopy notification letters to all foster parents, and submitting all payroll documentation in hardcopy. These paper-based approaches to information distribution were as inefficient as they were expensive.

Later, in the mid 1990s, the Agency attempted to move many documents online. Staff, clients and service providers had access to Email and to the World Wide Web, so downloading documents was not difficult. However, the Agency's IT department was not able to keep up with ongoing requests for changes and modifications to the Web site. Content was either not available, stale or inaccurate.

By 2001 numerous paper-based approaches had failed and the Agency Webmasters had resigned in frustration. Finally, in 2002, the Agency developed a fresh and innovate approach to information distribution. The Agency invested in a content maintenance framework that allowed non-IT social workers and program managers to maintain all Web-based content. Putting the content creation and maintenance role back into the hands of the process owners led to a dramatic streamlining of the government process in the Alameda County Social Services Agency.

The core of the county's system is a content maintenance tool called Contribute, which was developed by Macromedia, INC. This software application allows non-IT staff to easily create and maintain content through a simple "browse, edit, publish" workflow. More importantly, the Contribute-centric system allows information to be disseminated to clients and staff in real-time and has shaved \$250,000 off of the Agency's operating expenses.

### BENEFITS

The mission of AlamedaSocialServices.org is to provide "information at the speed of life" to the staff and clients. Making critical information available to everyone in a real-time manner is more than just a benefit of the Web site. This site, in many cases, makes a very real difference in the health and wellbeing of citizens.

The fundamental evidence of the site's benefit can be seen in the messages that users submit via the Web site's online message center. In the online message center citizens are invited to connect with the Agency when in-person, telephone or postal mail is not an option. Below are two examples of messages that we have received via AlamedaSocialServices.org:

Sample 1:

"I AM TRYING TO FIND MY GRANDMA... THE LAST I HEARD SHE WAS IN A NURSING HOME OF SOME KIND, AND I THINK SOMEONE SAID SHE GOT KICKED OUT OF THE LAST KNOWN HOME? SINCE THEN I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO LOCATE HER AT ALL! ITS A LITTLE MORE DIFFICULT FOR THE REASON THAT HER AND MY FATHER HAD WORDS THE LAST TIME THEY SPOKE, SO IN TURN BECAUSE OF THAT REASON, I'VE LOST TRACK OF HER. I WAS JUST HOPING YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO PUT ME IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION TO FIND HER? I HONESTILY DON'T HAVE A CLUE OTHERWISE!  
THANK YOU,  
TAMMY  
HER NAME IS; Jane Doe. HER LAST KNOWN RESIDENCE WAS IN THE SANTA CLARA COUNTY AREA."

Sample 2:

"We are interested in becoming foster parents for a deaf child...possibly children. Sue is fluent in ASL and we live in Fremont...very close to the Deaf School. Who do we need to contact about possible foster parenting and to sign up for foster parenting and how can we find out about a schedule of MAPP classes?"

Thank you,  
Jane Doe"

From distraught granddaughters to potential foster parents, AlamedaSocialServices.org is successfully reaching out to the community and opening new lines of communication. Moreover, the Web site allows citizens to reach in, at any time of the day or night, and obtain valuable assistance that is central to their health, wellbeing and safety.

This project has led the charge in what has evolved into a regional government paradigm shift. Countless jurisdictions have adopted the tools and methodologies developed by Alameda County. In addition, countries from across the globe have formally inquired about the tools, methodologies and systems that comprise AlamedaSocialServices.org.

This project has streamlined bureaucracy by creating a new, self-service sort of environment where the business process owner handles information creation, distribution and maintenance. In many cases, as highlighted above, the client plays a critical role in this flow of information.

The end result of this system is lower costs, improved service delivery systems, and a healthier community.

## **IMPORTANCE**

The story of AlamedaSocialServices.org really centers on a humanistic paradigm shift that has led to decreased bureaucratic hurdles for Alameda County staff and citizens. But information technology has played a central role in this project.

Agency programmers designed the Web-based content maintenance system that powers AlamedaSocialServices.org. The system, called the Online Practice Guide (OPG) Framework, uses a variety of technologies. The core technologies used by the OPG include:

- Macromedia Web Publishing System (including Contribute and Contribute Publishing Services)
- Macromedia ColdFusion
- Interwoven TeamSite 6.1
- Microsoft Windows Server 2003

Because it allows non-IT staff to immediately disseminate mission critical information, the OPG Framework is revolutionizing the manner in which public agencies communicate with their staff and constituents.

In addition to advanced content maintenance, the OPG Framework is also a platform on which new and

innovative public sector applications are being developed. One new piece of technology developed by AlamedaSocialServices.org programmers, and hosted on the OPG Framework, is called the “Online Time Study (OTS). The OTS is a Web-based human resources tool that allows agency staff to electronically submit time sheets that are used to leverage state and federal funds.

AlamedaSocialServices.org, along with the associated tools, online applications and 35,000 pages of policies and procedures is a 24x7 resource for citizens and staff. This site, in conjunction with the OPG Framework, is successfully streamlining the processes by which the Alameda County government does business.

## **ORIGINALITY**

AlamedaSocialServices.org was the first Web site in the nation that enabled non-IT social work managers to update Web-based policies and procedures. Another exceptional aspect of this project lay in the fact that there are now over three-dozen content owners within the Agency. If the current growth pattern continues, which is expected, the numbers of Agency content owners will double every year until 2010.

The other exceptional aspect of this technology is that private industry has taken notice of it. Not only have many public sector companies leased this technology, but mainstream companies have also requested information and assistance from our team. This is one of the rare instances where a regional government has outpaced local business in the realm of technological advancement.

## **SUCCESS**

This project has not exceeded our goals.

As a social service agency our true goal is to eradicate poverty, abuse, neglect and maltreatment. We work night and day to ensure that our services are needed less in the future by the people we serve. AlamedaSocialServices.org has connected foster parents with foster children, led to permanent adoptions and has helped impoverished citizens get back on their feet. This Macromedia Contribute-centric Web site has greatly reduced the bureaucratic hurdles that staff and clients must face.

In spite of the paradigm shift that is being led via the use of the Web site, there is still much progress to be made towards our unfortunately unattainable goal of ensuring the total health, safety and success of all citizens.

## **DIFFICULTY**

This project faced two near-crushing areas of difficulty at its inception:

1. Doubt
2. Internal Procurement Processes

Initially, many people in our Agency were reluctant to believe that a system could be developed where by all 35,000 pages of policies, procedures and forms could be placed online. Moreover, there was total doubt that this project would culminate with the development of a framework that enabled non-IT staff to easily maintain the material.

In addition to doubts rooted in technology, there were real fears that a new and large system of this kind would distract the agency from its core business of working with clients in a “one-on-one” setting.

Only through demonstration after demonstration were the publicly elected stakeholders convinced that the technology was in fact attainable. And, after time, the team was successful in its lobby to articulate that this system would actually increase, not decrease, staff’s ability to provide the one-on-one personalized attention that is so important to the business of the Agency.

Reducing doubt to a level that would allow the project to move forward was only part of the difficulty. Like most government agencies, this Agency’s procurement process is designed to scrutinize every each and every cent that is spent. Nowhere is there more scrutiny than in the area of information technology spending.

There was no magic solution to the procurement woes faced by this project. The only viable solution was, and continues to be, persistence. Time and time again the project team filled out “one more form” or obtained “one more original signature” on a vendor-generated document. The project was only completed due to the manager’s relentless vision and vigorous passion about the role that this tool would eventually play in the Agency and in the community.

