SUMMARY
At the vanguard of keeping children safe and protected, a new world-class Child Welfare Intake System enables social workers to provide supportive and preventative services for families and protect children from abuse and neglect.

APPLICATION
In the 1990s, several high-profile tragedies affecting Aboriginal people in Manitoba, including the cases of J.J. Harper and Helen Betty Osborne, drew the public’s attention and caused strong reactions to issues related to justice for Aboriginal people in the province. The Manitoba Government responded by establishing the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry which was given the broad mandate to examine all aspects of justice for Aboriginal people in Manitoba including the area of child and family services.

Aboriginal children, it was recognized, were over-represented in the province’s child welfare system. Statistics for the province indicated that while Aboriginals accounted for some 11% of the general population, they accounted for 78% of all children in care, 70% of youth in custody and 52% of pregnant teens. It was also apparent that there had been no significant positive changes to these statistics for over a decade.

To address these and other issues, the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry report recommended that:

“Aboriginal people are entitled to the provision of child and family services in a manner which respects their unique status, and their cultural and linguistic heritage”;

“The jurisdiction of the reserve-based Indian Child and Family Service agencies be extended to include off-reserve band members”; 

"The Province of Manitoba in conjunction with the Manitoba Metis Federation develop a mandated Metis Child and Family Service Agency with jurisdiction over Metis and non-status children throughout Manitoba”; and

“A mandated Aboriginal Child and Family Service Agency be established in the City of Winnipeg”.

In 1999, the Government of Manitoba committed itself to address the recommendations of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry. Recognizing the healing power of traditional family in Aboriginal culture, a resolution was passed such that the child welfare recommendations could be “fast tracked” as an immediate priority for implementation. The resulting Aboriginal Justice Inquiry Child Welfare Initiative (AJI-CWI) featured the expansion of off-reserve authority for First Nations and the establishment of a province-wide Metis mandate.

In November 2003, the new Child and Family Services Authorities Act was proclaimed. Under this Act, four new Child and Family Service authorities were created to deliver culturally appropriate services for all Manitobans. The four new authorities created at that time included: First Nations of Northern Manitoba, First Nations of Southern Manitoba, Metis Child and Family Services, and the General Child and Family Services Authority. Prior to the proclamation of the Act, First Nations agencies could only provide mandated child welfare service on their own reserves; all other child welfare services throughout the rest of Manitoba were provided by provincially funded Child and Family Services agencies and the Manitoba Department of Family Services and Housing.

The vision for this new structure was based on four main principles:
- The rights and authority of First Nations and Metis peoples would be recognized province-wide;
- Services would be community-based;
- Services would be culturally appropriate; and
- Services would be coordinated jointly.

To support and accommodate the new structure of Manitoba’s Child and Family Services delivery system and to ensure the effective and efficient joint coordination of services, a new computer-based Child Welfare Intake System (CWIS) was developed for implementation throughout the province. “Intake” is the process of collecting and screening data and information by case workers which leads to the determination of whether agency services are required and appropriate. The Intake process is initiated whenever there is a referral or request for service concerning a new case or an existing (open or closed) case. Previously, there was no automated support for this critical part of the child welfare service delivery process and it was performed manually.

CWIS is based on province-wide case management standards which provide a consistent template for the collection and storage of intake-related information across all Child and Family Services Authorities and their agencies. It was designed to meet or exceed all applicable legislative and legal reporting requirements including those of information privacy and confidentiality. All agencies mandated under the Child and Family Services Authorities Act will ultimately use CWIS to support their intake process, collect information and initiate cases.

CWIS has been designed to operate in conjunction with Manitoba’s existing back-end case management system, the Child and Family Services Information System (CFSIS). While CWIS is a new stand-alone application, it does ‘consult’ with CFSIS on each and every prior contact check and shares certain case information through an automated transfer of data from CWIS to CFSIS. This provides case workers with a comprehensive, up-to-date electronic record of each person and family involved with Child and Family Services agencies province-wide, a key capability which was unavailable in the past.

Significant features of this comprehensive new system include:
- Province-wide, real time prior contact checks for referrals and applicants; by name, street address or rural community;
- Detailed recording of referral information, presenting issues and appropriate response times (all based on provincial standards);
- An automated safety assessment and safety plan based on issues identified during referral and investigation;
- Detailed recording of services assigned to address each issue;
- Automated, real-time update of person-related information no matter where an intake worker is situated in the province;
- Automated transfer of CWIS intake data to the back-end CFSIS case management system to initiate a new CFSIS case or to append to an existing one;
- Detailed information recorded as to the results and outcomes of intake activities (both for cases concluded at intake as well as those referred on for further service);
- Easy reassignment of single or multiple intakes to new workers to help balance and manage caseloads; and
- Sophisticated internal and external security measures including the auditing and logging of all information accesses and updates.

As CWIS is used by child and family services case workers both inside and outside of government, it was designed to be accessible via the Manitoba government’s private internal data network as well as directly via the Internet using Family Services and Housing’s Secure Internet Services (SIS) Portal. The SIS Portal enables highly-secure, reliable and efficient access to CWIS for authorized individuals via any Internet-connected personal computer. The use of SIS as an access channel has enabled the fast, easy and roll out of CWIS without incurring additional infrastructure costs.

Implementation of CWIS began in the spring of 2004 and is scheduled to be completed province-wide by July 2005. At that time, CWIS will be used by over 800 case workers at all Child and Family Services offices and locations (over 125) throughout Manitoba. This will encompass the four Child and Family Services Authorities, twenty-two child welfare service delivery agencies, the offices of the Children’s Advocate and the Chief Medical Examiner as well as the government’s Executive Support Unit.

**BENEFITS**

Even in its early stages of implementation, CWIS has proven itself to be a useful tool to child welfare case workers across Manitoba through its comprehensive and pervasive intake tracking and reporting capabilities. By enabling the centralized collection of a large volume of complex child welfare information, it not only aids
effective individual case management but serves as a database for statistical analysis and reporting which further aids planning, policy development and executive decision making.

The individual benefits resulting from the creation and implementation of CWIS are both significant and numerous. They can be broadly categorized in the following three key areas:
- child safety and security;
- executive management and administrative planning; and
- economic and financial.

Child Safety and Security

Prior to the development of CWIS, agencies could not share or access each other’s intake information electronically which greatly hindered their overall capability to deliver service. With the advent of CWIS, case workers now have a powerful tool available to them twenty-four hours a day, each and every day of the year, enabling and supporting timely first responses to issues so that no child is left at risk.

With the implementation of CWIS, case workers across all Child and Family Services agencies have access to the new joint, comprehensive CWIS/CFSIS person registry for prior contact checks—a critical new and frequently used support for case workers. This use of a single province-wide directory to track people reduces the risk of a child or family ‘falling through the cracks’, even though they may move to a different region of the province or change service providers.

CWIS provides a standardized process and repository for information collection and storage. It compels and enables users and agencies to compile consistent documentation based on provincial case management standards and best practices. It also enables agencies to share information and to collaborate efficiently to provide improved service to Manitoba children and families. Examples of the types of the information recorded in CWIS are:

- Who made a referral or raised an issue and when?
- Who is in the family (including their demographic information and whereabouts)?
- What issues were brought to the agency’s attention by the source of the initial referral?
- Which of those presenting issues were deemed to be valid, invalid or inconclusive?
- Were further issues identified during assessment or investigation?
- Is a safety assessment required for the child(ren) and if so, what is the result of that assessment and what actions occurred to keep the child(ren) safe?
- What services are being provided to the family?
- What was the outcome of the intake? Does the family require longer-term intervention or has the matter been resolved?

Other notable child safety and security features of CWIS include:
- Case notes can be electronically attached to the intake to record additional information and keep it all together; and
- Supervisors can complete timely on-line reviews and approvals at key steps in the intake process.

By utilizing both Manitoba’s private internal data network as well as the Internet as channels for delivery, access to child welfare intake information is available in every corner of the province including rural and remote areas. CWIS provides a common, automated linkage between otherwise independent agencies and facilitates the rapid transfer of information. The cumulative result is quicker responses to children and families who require help as well as better assessments, case management decisions, interventions and outcomes.

Executive Management and Administrative Planning

All gathering and reporting of statistics is automated within CWIS. These statistical reporting capabilities have been identified as an invaluable feature of CWIS as it is the first time that this information has been recorded electronically and made available for statistical analysis and research. Initially, a suite of fifteen reports has been implemented to support statistical and data quality assurance purposes related to intake activities. The extensive use of drop down selection criteria lists allows for a great deal of flexibility to refine the data included on individual reports.

Some other important features for executive management and administrative planning are:
- The ability to analyze data at the agency, authority, geographic and provincial levels in order to plan and evaluate programs and allocate precious resources.
- Automated on-line supervisor reviews and approvals enable efficient and timely case activity/consults and
results in well documented processes and decisions.

Economic / Financial

An impressive 75% reduction in the paperwork previously associated with the intake process has been noted, validating the efficiency of CWIS’s design and implementation. This ensures that the information that was previously collected only on paper forms is now online and available for instant real-time sharing anywhere in the province which greatly reduces the staff time previously required for the preparation and handling of voluminous paper files. By reducing the proportion of time that case workers must spend on the administration of their case load, more time can be spent working directly with a greater number of children and families in need of help.

CWIS was built to reuse Manitoba’s existing CFSIS system as a very capable back-end case management system as opposed to recreating this functionality anew, saving millions of dollars in development costs. Many more millions of dollars of infrastructure costs were also avoided by using the Internet as a delivery channel for CWIS, eliminating the need for a costly expansion of the government’s private desktop and networking environment.

IMPORTANCE

CWIS is a user friendly system designed and built to accommodate a diverse community of end users with varying degrees of computer and keyboarding skills and computer experience while ensuring that they can all work effectively and efficiently.

Among its many features is automated workflow support with built-in intelligence and data cross-checking such that it ensures that the proper intake process path is followed based on the information entered by the case worker. An example of this would be that if the intake worker enters information that would be consistent with abuse, CWIS will ensure that a safety assessment is completed and processed as part of the intake.

One of the most significant benefits of CWIS is its ability to link to and consult with Manitoba’s back-end CFSIS case management system. Any case worker in the province can enter any known information on a person such as name, address, sex, age, etc. and in a matter of seconds, the system can search through more than 370,000 individual person records across both databases to determine what, if any, information exists on that person.

CWIS was deployed directly to the Internet in a secure fashion via the re-use of the Department’s versatile Secure Internet Services Portal which enables the flexibility to access CWIS anywhere an Internet-connected personal computer is available.

A recent proof-of-concept pilot has successfully demonstrated that CWIS can also be used on a handheld personal digital assistant over a wireless Internet connection. This opens up the possibility of an exciting new capability of putting CWIS further out into the field and into the hands of front line service delivery staff—any time and anywhere access to CWIS and its vital information is needed.

ORIGINALITY

Manitoba has been recognized as a world leader in the area of Aboriginal rights and CWIS is a vital new tool to ensure that child welfare services in Manitoba will be delivered consistent with the vision and goals described for the AJI-CWI initiative as described in the Introductory Overview above. Innovative supporting features such as an Authority Determination Protocol (ADP) template ensure that children and families will be guided towards culturally appropriate services.

Previously, there was no automated support for intake, a critical phase of the child welfare service delivery process. With the advent of CWIS, case workers now have a comprehensive, consistent and up-to-date electronic record of each person and family involved with all child and family services agencies province-wide, a key capability which was unavailable in the past.

Prior to the development of CWIS, only basic personal information about clients (name, age, gender etc.) could be recorded and compiled for storage and subsequent retrieval from the databases. Case information about family issues, services delivered and the outcomes of interventions was recorded in narrative, anecdotal reports. CWIS allows for the inclusion of narrative reports but requires that case workers follow a defined protocol whereby information and data are recorded in specific fields (from comprehensive drop down lists). This enables quick and simple recording of complex case information and also facilitates the compilation,
retrieval, review and, when necessary, aggregation of data for statistical analysis.

SUCCESS

Just eight months into CWIS’s implementation schedule, more than 300 users have already been trained and over 2,000 intakes and 6,000 associated case notes have been entered into the system.

Despite the challenge of the learning curve associated with the introduction of any new information system, there has been much positive feedback from the service delivery workers who have received their training and have begun using CWIS. Specific feedback received includes:

- “It is so user friendly.”
- “Our paper use has dropped by 75% at intake.”
- “I feel more in control of my documentation.”

For agencies whose jurisdiction covers a large geographic area of the province, there is a tremendous benefit to having timely access to the information as it is entered, regardless of the user’s geographic location.

One of the goals of the CWIS project is to have all agencies gathering and recording the same set of information for each of their intakes. The use of CWIS ensures that case workers and supervisors are meeting the minimum recording standards. This translates into the capability to conduct better and more complete analysis of program information as well as better case documentation for future reference.

DIFFICULTY

CWIS is a sophisticated and complex information system which needed to be developed in a very short period of time in order to meet an aggressive business implementation timeline. The project team, consisting of a blend of child welfare business experts and information technology professionals, came together and worked out the basic system design in just eight weeks. Immediately following this phase, the development and user acceptance testing was completed in only five months, an exceptionally rapid pace for an innovative new information system like CWIS.

Because CWIS is a significant step forward in terms of technology as well as business practice, it changes the way an agency’s service delivery is conducted. This presents a challenge in terms of not only learning how to use a new computer system but to create and implement the new work process changes required by it.