



Investing in Essential Technology and Remote Connection for Child Welfare

MARKET TRENDS REPORT



Introduction

The landscape of the globe is constantly shifting underneath our feet. Pandemics, public health emergencies, and massive weather events have impacted all fields of public service work. But child welfare services is among the areas experiencing the most noticeable effects.

Frontline workers in these agencies are constantly navigating critical situations, connecting with children and family in homes and returning to the office after field work. They need the ability to access critical information on the go. Limited technology and complicated manual and paper-based processes, however, have long presented serious challenges.

That became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many child welfare agencies to quickly pivot to support telework, allowing people to connect and share important information in new ways.

In fact, this pandemic presents an opportunity to transform casework in child welfare. Now is the time to better support caseworkers, allowing them to focus on the impactful work required to change the lives of the most vulnerable instead of being mired in manual processes.

But this can't happen without the right technology in place. Agencies must no longer delay in investing in cloud-enabled technology so caseworkers can access and update case files from anywhere.

To better understand the solutions needed at this pivotal moment, GovLoop partnered with Northwoods, a technology company focused on improving human services, for this market trends report. In the following pages, we'll explore the landscape and challenges of child welfare services today and how technology could transform the field.

By the Numbers: Child Welfare Services

Due to the sheer volume, breadth and complexity of a case file, it can take a child welfare worker upward of 12 hours to review the history of just one case

43%

of health and human services decision-makers say a lack of data-sharing and access are the primary inhibitors to improved service delivery.

\$54,000

is spent, on average, training each new social worker.

80%

of case information and data lives in an unstructured format, making it difficult to access.

A typical child welfare case file contains over 1,000 documents, or approximately 4,000-5,000 pages of information.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Safety and Health Administration recommended the use and support of technology in the high-risk health care and social service sectors to increase efficiencies.

91%

of agencies utilize three to five workers or more to conduct audits.

96%

of agencies commit four to nine hours per week or more on audit preparation.

64%

of agencies report that audits take away their time from serving families.

The Challenge: Operating Remotely in a New Normal

Child welfare and HHS agencies have long had growing demands on their time and resources from clients, social workers, caseworkers, clerical staff, lawyers and the community at large. There are also the responsibilities of recruiting new staff, improving employee retention and ensuring compliance with local, state and federal mandates.

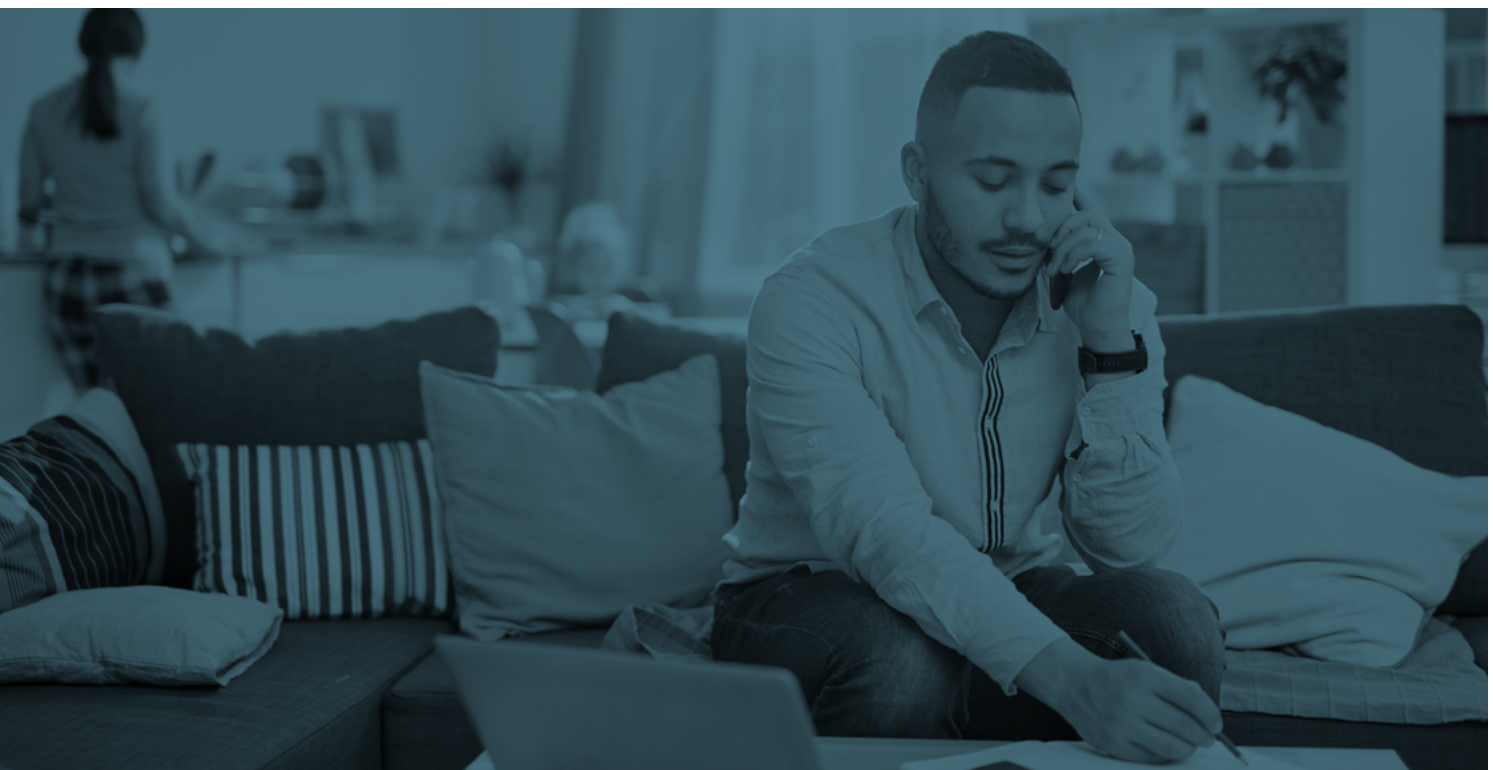
Additionally, mandates and priorities are constantly changing, increasing the effort required by agencies. Reductions in tax revenue also indicate agencies might need to lay off or furlough workers, causing additional strain on the remaining workers to handle even more complex cases, which may cause more stress and possibly more turnover.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded that child welfare agencies quickly pivot to support telework, and enable people to connect and share important information in new and different ways. Other public health or natural disaster crises, such as the opioid crisis and significant weather events, only emphasize the need for connecting remotely in this field.

“Existing broad challenges have been illuminated by the current landscape,” said Rich Bowlen, Vice President/ Evangelist, Child Welfare at Northwoods. “Things we’ve long been concerned about in the field in terms of technology limitations are now true challenges.”

“States and local jurisdictions never really had child welfare systems that were designed to support good child welfare practices,” said Stuart Venzke, Health and Human Services Executive at Amazon Web Services (AWS) State and Local Government. “These systems were designed instead to collect information for federal reporting purposes. But what they weren’t designed for was actually to help workers, particularly child welfare workers in the field, to make better decisions, and drive better outcomes.”

The pandemic has only exposed and exacerbated challenges to good child welfare practices.



The Solution:

Investing in Essential Technology for Remote Connection

Agencies must invest in tools and essential technology now to prepare for an expected surge in child welfare cases, as well as future public health or emergency crises. After COVID-19, reports of abuse or neglect are expected to increase when more mandated reporters have increased access to children.

These agencies must implement the right technology to mobilize child welfare caseworkers so they can work from anywhere. This means utilizing software that has web and mobile components; artificial intelligence (AI) elements to automatically analyze case content to quickly understand critical information from the past and present; and insight into specific, detailed information related to a particular person, case or topic.

“We need the right technology so that the insights and expertise of experienced caseworkers can be leveraged across lots of families and truly help those most in need,” said Venzke.

For caseworkers in child welfare who have long been hamstrung instead of empowered by their platforms, the right technology must have the following elements:

- A **web application** that allows anyone in the agency to access all case content from anywhere
- A **mobile application**, optimized for when workers are in the field engaging with families, that automatically syncs newly collected case content
- The ability to leverage the power of **big data** and the information and volumes of case records they already have to make well-informed, more confident decisions
- **Natural language processing** and **text analytics** tools that empower workers to learn about key topics, people and events in a case to make informed decisions about safety
- **Instant access** to case content from anywhere
- The ability for **content to be contributed** from anywhere regardless of connectivity
- The ability for caseworkers and supervisors to **share documents**, photos and videos, and hand off work
- Access to **digital forms** when working remotely regardless of connectivity



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Best Practices: Connecting Remotely With the Right Technology and Tactics

Keep workers engaged and informed:

Try to avoid solely relying on email to communicate. You lose the human connection when you can't see facial expressions or hear the inflection in someone's voice. Instead, use video conferencing as often as possible for remote meetings or check-ins. More importantly, make sure everyone who's part of the conversation is present — and that means no multitasking.

Provide tools to help caseworkers do their work:

Technology won't address every challenge with managing a remote workforce, but tools that are purpose-built for human services will help make your long-term plan more successful. "Technology that's built to evolve with your team's needs can help caseworkers stay connected with supervisors and share work, provide access to case information and forms, and keep confidential information secure," said Bowlen. This will go a long way in minimizing burnout by removing obstacles that stand in the way of truly connecting with children and families.

Prioritize coaching:

New caseworkers can really struggle with not having direct contact with supervisors to provide coaching or validation. Ask people how they are doing and what you can do to help. What's working? What's not? Where are they getting stuck? In the office, someone can easily see if you're free and pop in to ask questions. With a remote team, you'll have to be more intentional. Set virtual office hours and stick to them so your staff knows when you're available.

Be flexible:

Trying to force caseworkers into only being problem-solvers on a set schedule, Monday through Friday, is counterproductive. Workers shouldn't be confined, but they also shouldn't have to be available and connected all day, every day or they'll burn out. The focus should be cultivating an environment where caseworkers feel they can be at their most creative. Do that, and quality outcomes are sure to follow.

HOW NORTHWOODS HELPS

As an AWS Public Sector partner, Northwoods helps child welfare as well as adult and aging agencies leverage the power of the cloud and big data to make well-informed, more confident decisions using information they already have.

Northwoods launched Traverse to give child welfare agencies the power to access case content from anywhere with insight into information they never had before. Using natural language processing and text analytics tools to operationalize big data, Traverse empowers workers to find key topics, people and events in a case to and make informed decisions about safety.

Northwoods collaborates with AWS and runs Traverse on the AWS cloud for cost-effective, scalable and secure IT resources. The ability to meet changing demands and quickly adapt to changing practices, standards and laws are key benefits that Northwoods receives from the AWS cloud.

"This cloud technology is the same technology that's used by some of the largest and most successful private sector companies in the world, including Amazon.com," Bowlen said. "And now, Northwoods is bringing this technology to bear on these pressing social problems."

Learn more at: info.teamnorthwoods.com/traverse-for-child-welfare



Case Study: Automating Flow of Client and Case Information in Erie County, PA

Pennsylvania's Erie County Office of Children and Youth, a child welfare agency, initially needed a solution to its data collection problems.

Because of new state laws, the Erie County Office of Children and Youth saw its caseload climb steadily over the past several years. The organization struggled to keep up with the workload due to outdated manual filing processes.

"We were getting more cases, but our workers in the field would sometimes lose track of documents or need to make corrections and then have to travel back to the main office to find the right files or change files before bringing them back to a family's home," said Michael Whitney, administrator of intake and placement services at Erie County Office of Children and Youth.

To address its challenges, the Erie County Office of Children and Youth engaged Northwoods, which implemented Traverse to automate the flow of client and case information and digitize all case files. With this solution, employees are able to use mobile devices to access files easily, and collect new data such as photos, forms and electronic signatures. Caseworkers are also able to refer families for necessary services right away, which builds trust between the caseworker and family. The mobile application works regardless of connectivity, so caseworkers always have access to the information they need.

"We would be in such a different position without Northwoods," said Lana Rees, director at Erie County Office of Children and Youth. "We are very fortunate that we can work so effectively with remote access to all our records."

Conclusion

It's time to revolutionize the way child welfare agencies operate. Caseworkers need to be able to efficiently collect, retrieve and share case content and evidence from anywhere. Child welfare agencies can serve vulnerable children and families like never before with a solution that automatically analyzes information collected with no additional work required. It's time to empower caseworkers, supervisors, directors and state executives to make informed, confident decisions for the vulnerable adults, children and families they serve.

COVID-19 has highlighted long-standing issues with technology and remote work in the field of child welfare — but it also provides a massive opportunity. Now is the time for child welfare agencies to invest in technology solutions

that transform the practice and enable employees to make the highest-quality decisions. Caseworkers and social workers need cloud-based technology that is accessible anywhere, driven by meaningful analytics that empowers workers with actionable insights.

"This is an opportunity to reimagine the systems of child welfare to empower caseworkers and give them what they need to do the work they are called to do," Bowlen said.



ABOUT NORTHWOODS

Northwoods is a technology company truly focused on human services. Your mission is our mission. We help you save lives and strengthen families. Here's how: nearly 45,000 social workers and caseworkers across the country use our solutions to manage, collect, view, and share content and data more efficiently, which saves them two hours a day. Workers repurpose that time to do more high-value work with clients. Agencies make the most of dollars and time, and have the information they need to make decisions and meet reporting requirements.

To learn more about Northwoods, please visit teamnorthwoods.com.



ABOUT GOVLOOP

GovLoop's mission is to "connect government to improve government." We aim to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.

For more information about this report, please reach out to info@govloop.com.



ABOUT AWS

Government, education, and nonprofit organizations face unique challenges to accomplish complex missions with limited resources. Public sector organizations around the world engaged in cloud computing projects overwhelmingly turn to Amazon Web Services (AWS) when they want to serve citizens more effectively, achieve scientific breakthroughs, reach broader constituents, reskill existing teams, attract the brightest minds, and put more time and resources into their core missions. AWS has the most operational experience, at greater scale, of any cloud service provider—from infrastructure technologies like compute, storage, and databases—to emerging technologies, such as machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI); data lakes and analytics; and Internet of Things (IoT). AWS has dedicated teams focused on helping public sector organizations of all sizes—from healthcare and nonprofits to education and defense—use AWS to pave the way for innovation and, ultimately, make the world a better place through technology.

To learn more about AWS in the public sector, visit us at aws.amazon.com/publicsector.