Washington State:
Using Technology and Resource Management to Improve the Bottom Line

Long before it was fashionable to be “Lean\(^1\),” the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services’ Division of Child Support (DCS) was working to improve business processes by incorporating tools to leverage technology and resource management in order to reduce costs and increase efficiency. Specifically, DCS has focused on process improvement principles to effectively manage resources, save time, and help speed up production.

The DCS mission is to provide child support and revenue recovery services that lead to economic stability and financial self-sufficiency for individuals, families, and communities. With nearly 1,100 full time employees, DCS manages 350,000 cases statewide, covering 39 counties serviced by 9 field offices and a headquarters office. In fiscal year 2013, the division collected over $680 million in child support.

DCS operates a centralized processing unit, Central Services, which is the portal for all incoming documents including statewide mail, referrals, court orders, and payment receipts. Central Services was created in 2002 to implement efficiencies in scanning and electronic document capture technologies vital to the core functions of the Division. Central Services acts as the State Disbursement Unit (SDU) and the Washington State Support Registry (WSSR).

The Central Services Unit is responsible for processing all paper and electronic incoming payments, distributing these payments to families, imaging statewide mail volumes, and receiving, imaging, and setting up cases for court orders filed in the State of Washington. Central Services relies heavily on automation and the use of matrix style management and cross-functional team design, two tools that will be described and discussed later in this article.

Combining Functions to Improve Efficiency

Even before Central Services was created, DCS was committed to going “paperless,” knowing that automation would increase efficiencies, improve effectiveness, and provide faster and better service. Over time, DCS eliminated the need to copy and store physical documents long term by moving to a statewide document management

system. DCS now scans and stores case file and administrative documents, payments, and court order records electronically. These processes include digitizing approximately 700,000 documents per month. DCS Central Services routes images and distributes them electronically to case workers across the State, eliminating the need for paper files and documents. Payment documents are captured immediately upon opening by scanning and indexing and then are deposited by Image Cash Letter (ICL) to the bank for deposit. Payment documents are then available to case workers across the State. Ninety-seven percent of court orders and referrals are received electronically and are used for case set-up. These digital documents are delivered and able to be retrieved by multiple recipients simultaneously using a workflow model that improves efficiency and saves staff time.

Central Services functions were combined to gain economies of scale and benefit from the efficiencies available only in centralization. Although the imaging system supported various functions, prior to centralization the tasks were being performed by separate units of workers within Headquarters. Consequently, the workers who support the case set-up functions, the staff providing payment processing, and the centralized mail group had separate imaging processes that they were required to maintain.

The current organizational structure provides for integrated cross-functional teams of Support Enforcement Officer, Support Enforcement Technician, and Office Assistant staff who operate in a production environment to provide these statewide services. Staff is cross-trained and the workforce is deployed strategically based on the current workload priority.

Some of the goals of the reorganization were to enhance skill sets and career development for all staff; create a positive environment where staff can collaborate and are empowered to do their jobs; recognize individual and team performance; take advantage of cross-trained staff who can deploy to meet workload peaks; streamline processes; improve process timeframes; and absorb volume increases with existing staff. DCS’ Central Services consolidated model has helped the Division become more efficient by reducing processing times, eliminating the need to add full-time employees (FTEs), and creating a culture of efficient, transparent operations.

**Resource Management**

With the amount of work Central Services handles every day, it has become vital to its success to process volumes on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis. The matrix style of management allows the flexibility to evaluate workload and re-deploy human resources where they are most needed. This flexibility ensures that the work will be completed timely and accurately when monitored by leadership. Automation is utilized to create
matrix charts that allow supervisors to evaluate resources and make adjustments accordingly. The managers and lead workers constantly evaluate and adjust the job duties of staff to maximize coverage. This approach increases staff expertise and helps create multi-skilled employees.

Cross training continues to be a cornerstone of our success. It has also contributed to improved performance and morale. A Central Services supervisor had this to say: “Staff…is constantly learning new things that not only contribute more power to the capability of the business, they also see their own promotional opportunities grow simply by taking on the challenges that a multifaceted training plan presents for them. As they become more of an asset to the office, they become a more desirable, marketable commodity for any career pursuits they want to follow. This carries over to their positive morale and team building experience as they grow and learn together.” Cross training has not only become necessary but very popular among staff.

On a weekly basis, supervisors build tables with work assignments for payment and mail processing and case set-up staff. The matrix not only ensures there is sufficient staff assigned to each area to complete all work, it also helps to identify areas where coverage may be an issue due to planned absences and provides a means of making sure staff are receiving ample time necessary in their work areas to keep skill levels up.

Initial processing of mail and payment documents is completed primarily by Office Assistant (OA) staff in our Secure Area, the hub of our operational unit. Workflow is monitored closely throughout the day by the Workflow Coordinator and two lead workers who are assigned to the Secure Area as their primary area of responsibility. These lead workers are the workflow experts for this area and work closely with the OA staff daily.

OA staff report to different supervisors across the floor, yet take direction from the Secure Area Leadership Team (SALT) for daily tasks and training. Supervisors work with them on monitoring performance, growth and development, and personnel issues.

Every Friday, a lead worker prepares the matrix for the Secure Area for the following week based on expected volumes of mail and payments as well as planned absences. The lead worker must identify and take into consideration the status and progress of all trainees, must be able to identify which staff is fully trained in which areas, all while balancing out the workload to ensure every duty is covered. Although the completed matrix is published electronically, daily assignments are updated each morning on a whiteboard to which staff and lead workers can refer throughout the day to keep production moving quickly.
Secure Area Matrix:

Our case set-up staff, comprised of Support Enforcement Technicians (SETs), does a wide variety of work and is also cross trained in multiple areas. Referral volumes, planned absences, progress of trainees, and individual production capabilities are all taken into consideration when supervisors create the weekly matrix. Duties are assigned to ensure adequate coverage of work but also to create a variety of work in multiple areas to prevent burn-out. Although volumes of work can be stated in averages, the number of referrals received each day can vary greatly. The Central Services Unit relies on these staff members being flexible and able to quickly change from one duty to another to complete these fluctuating work volumes.

SET Matrix:

Supervisors and the Workflow Coordinator review the matrix, work production status report, and attendance daily. When needed, they also utilize many of our SET staff members who have previously been OAs in the Secure Area. Having this amount of staff cross trained in various areas vastly increases our resource pool and gives us the ability to easily adapt to unplanned staffing changes. The OA and SET job classes have had a somewhat high turnover rate in the last 2-3 years due to retirements and internal promotions. At times this has caused less than ideal staffing levels in our Secure Area. However, the matrix and cross training system of managing staffing resources has made it possible to complete work with little to no delay. A recent statewide hiring freeze had an impact on staffing levels for which the cross training was a life saver. Without the ability to fill staff vacancies, Central Services was
able to maintain processing service levels by prioritizing work and leveraging human resources.

The Support Enforcement Officer (SEO) job class in the Central Services Unit performs many advanced level payment processing functions such as correcting payment errors, electronic funds transfer (EFT) functions, and IRS negative adjustments as well as managing specialized caseloads not worked at the field office level. Advanced level payment processing functions require highly technical staff. With the many differing duties in these areas, cross training is of the utmost importance to ensure an adequate knowledge base. Most functions have between two and four SEO staff members fully trained and performing such duties on a regular basis. Repetition is imperative to ensure the expertise of these employees. Due to the more limited volume of work in this area, this team self-manages using matrix style tools and most functions are performed by these staff members on a recurring basis each day. SEO staff performing advanced level payment processing functions arranges for coverage of their duties for planned absences and in most cases a lead worker will arrange coverage for unplanned absences.

One exception to this is the SEO staff performing EFT related duties where the employees have chosen to utilize a calendar-based assignment method for designating who shall complete specific EFT duties. These staff members also perform extremely technical work and a majority of the time work independently as a highly functioning team, ensuring that all work in this area is completed with minimal guidance needed from supervisors or lead workers. Planned absences are taken into consideration as employees sign up for work on the calendar and in case of an unplanned absence any member of the team may initiate communication to alert others that coverage is needed. As with other areas in the Central Services Unit, the volume of work determines the amount of staffing resources required to complete these duties. The calendar based system helps ensure that each duty within the EFT area is covered and allows for adequate rotation of duties for skill and knowledge retention.

EFT Calendar:

To wrap up this cross functional team environment, we move on to areas for which supervisors and managers are responsible in the Central Services Unit. These areas are also managed by a matrix; however it is only updated on a somewhat irregular basis as needed, such as when a new supervisor or lead worker is appointed or when supervisors or managers decide a change would be beneficial. Changing areas of responsibility also ensures that not only staff is cross
trained, but also supervisors. An advantage to this is that staff can approach any supervisor for advice. This Responsibilities Matrix is at the heart of knowing who is responsible for a particular area, who is the trainer/lead worker, who else is a resource, and when they are available. Although the supervisor and lead worker with primary responsibility are the go-to persons for their area, listing other individuals as resources helps with any immediate or urgent need in the event the primary contacts are unavailable. In addition, it provides a method of ascertaining that all areas within the unit have someone appointed and all areas are supported.

**Responsibilities Matrix:**

First line supervisors each have 15-17 multi-functional staff members in four different job classes within their teams. These employees also work closely with the supervisors and lead workers responsible for the specific work assignment areas to which they are assigned. As the experts in their areas, the supervisor and lead worker for each area work closely to create and update as needed, procedural manuals and training plans. They also coordinate training and keep the individual staff supervisors updated on the status of training, performance, or other issues related to their area.

**Summary**

The Central Services Unit of WA Division of Child Support has an excellent record of producing high volume and high quality work regardless of the status of available human resources. Staff at all levels within the Division is committed, cares about doing a good job, and takes pride in the work. Even with such a highly committed and excellent staff, some of the challenges we have faced could not have been overcome had such a contemporary way of managing our human resources not been developed. Cross training guarantees that in the majority of instances there will be staff members available to complete every function necessary at any time, work will be performed with the highest possible quality, and staff will be continuously encouraged to develop and learn new knowledge and skills.

Wally McClure, Director, Division of Child Support said it well: “I’m very proud of our Central Services team’s work. Over the years we have been able to centralize more and more work without increasing Central Services staff. Not only do they consistently perform an amazing amount of work accurately and professionally, but they continue to find ways to improve their processes.”

Lynnie Larsen is Washington State’s Chief of Central Services in the Division of Child Support (DCS). Lynnie began her career with DCS in 1982 primarily in the fiscal realm. Since 2002, Lynnie has overseen the Central Services Unit in Headquarters, which incorporates the statewide centralized functions of the State Disbursement Unit (SDU), the Central Registry, and Centralized Mail.

Kristina Butler has been with WA DCS since 1999. Her career started in the Tacoma Field Office with most of that time as a caseload carrying Support Enforcement Officer and trainer. She joined Central Services as a supervisor in May 2012.