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An Innovative Adaptation of General Purpose Accounting Software for a Municipal Social Services Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizations with unique characteristics and transaction processing requirements, such as government agencies, often satisfy these requirements by (a) acquiring software from vendors who have developed applications for that particular type of organization, or (b) developing software internally from scratch. When either of these approaches is taken, the development costs are spread over a relatively small number of organizations, and the resulting system can be very expensive. Also, due to the uniqueness of the application and the relatively small number of users, it may take a long time to identify and correct any processing errors. An alternative is to acquire general-purpose software that has been developed for a wide range of organizations, and to adapt it for the agency in which it will be installed. However, this alternative approach is frequently not undertaken because it is often believed that general-purpose software is unable to provide all of the information required by the organization. When the required information can be provided, though, general-purpose software can be less expensive and less time-consuming to implement.

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This case presents a successful use of the latter approach. It describes how a general-purpose accounting software package was successfully adapted to meet the information processing needs of the foster care program in a large municipal government agency located on the Eastern seaboard of the United States. The primary contribution of this case is to explain the agency's information processing needs and how the application software was modified to meet them, since it is often believed that general-purpose software cannot be customized to meet the needs of organizations which are not typical merchandising, manufacturing or service businesses. Therefore, this case should be useful as a reference for others who are involved in, or who are considering, similar projects. In addition, as will be discussed briefly below, this approach yielded the additional benefits of significantly reducing the time and the cost required for system development.

BACKGROUND

One of the important roles of government is to provide a safety net to certain sectors of society that need assistance. While a variety of services are provided to needy families and children by social service agencies in the United States, ensuring the safety and well-being of at-risk children has always been a focus of attention among government officials, community leaders and charitable organizations. Among the many programs designed to serve the needs of children in most jurisdictions, foster care programs are the most popular.

The primary purpose of the foster care program is to provide alternative care to children who cannot remain at home due to maltreatment, abandonment or neglect. In the city on which this case study is based, the state develops policies that govern the foster care program and also maintains administrative oversight while local social service agencies are charged with the task of administering the program in accordance with the law. This includes identifying care providers and arranging temporary and permanent out-of-home placement for children believed to be in imminent risk.

Upon removing children from their homes in response to reported incidents of maltreatment or neglect, social workers first explore the possibility of placing the children with relatives. Typically, relative care providers are not paid for their services although they may receive food and medical assistance for the children placed in their care. If relatives who are willing and able to care for the at-risk children cannot be identified, the agency places the children in foster homes.

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