



How Data Sharing and Integrated Information Systems Can Improve Government Performance

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America's administrative public servants – although often unrecognized and under-appreciated – are the backbone of U.S. government institutions. They serve as social and legal pillars, the people responsible for maintaining, allocating, and distributing America's public resources for the benefit of society. To name just some examples, consider the caseworkers who help low-income families navigate federal support systems, the park employees who trek through wildernesses to open public access to America's natural splendor, and the administrators in the Department of Education who fight to make sure every child, regardless of ability, receives the services and developmental aid they need to be successful. These public servants, and the many others who make modern life in America possible, typically choose their careers because they want to give back – to serve their fellow citizens.

Nevertheless, these dedicated public servants often have to make do with top-down, hierarchical leadership structures, limited agency resources, and compartmentalized bureaucracies. Such conditions frequently result in limited access to vital information and sometimes lead to erratic, uninformed decisions and disconnects between decision-makers and the front-line public servants who work with the public every day. Such conditions contribute to the pervasive public perception that government is slow, disorganized, inefficient, and wasteful – a mindset that is equally damaging to public agencies and the people who work in them and can diminish support for the tax resources needed to maintain and improve agencies.

During my career in both public service and academia, my work on improving programs has taught me that when government agencies find ways to share information and data, they enable public servants to improve services. Effective information sharing makes access to government support and programs more efficient and accessible, and as well as allows public servants to better communicate the important role government plays in the lives of everyday citizens.

Helping Public Servants Help Their Constituents

Although many young people enter public sector jobs determined to make a positive difference – too often, once on the job, the “light leaves their eyes” as they confront multiple limitations and insurmountable barriers. Some of these come from poorly-crafted legislation, inadequate funding, or the overwhelming reality of specific social problems. But, other barriers are due simply to agencies' inability to use or share information effectively – due to a combination of legal, technological, and practical reasons.

Nearly every state and territory in the United States now has some form of integrated data system in place or under development. Such systems link individual records from disparate public programs and make that interconnected information available to researchers and public-facing web sites. Since the early 2000s federal agencies have been funding these initiatives as a way to foster government transparency, help agencies learn about their performance, and identify new ways agencies can work together. Effective integrated data systems help public servants identify gaps in services and pinpoint where they should target outreach and work to increase access for specific groups of citizens. Well-designed initiatives can even bust myths about public services and help communicate the value of government to citizens.

Promises and Challenges of Sharing Data

When multiple programs or systems serve the same population, integrated data systems provide public servants information about their collective impact and help them identify ways they can improve outcomes together. Even so, sharing data can feel risky. Unlike private sector purveyors of “big data,” government

agencies have long been required to restrict private information and have rigorous processes in place to protect personal data. Data use and sharing can also be unnerving for public servants vying for legitimacy or funding. Successfully integrating data held by separate agencies requires mutual trust.

But there can be big payoffs. For the first time in my home state of Minnesota, the Early Childhood Special Education program can track whether the children they serve prior to kindergarten continue to use special education in elementary school (many do not). State agencies are also collaborating to assess early intervention programs in health and education, to see how children fare over time and determine when they need additional support. Thanks to the state's integrated data system, officials can now see when families are not using specific services for which they are eligible. These shared data help prove when programs work and provide local communities the information they need to conduct targeted outreach.

Best Practices

Integrated data systems are often expensive, which is why federal agencies help states build them. In the process, states can minimize difficulties by taking the following steps:

- Engage legal counsels in affected agencies early and often;
- Garner the support of high-level leaders who understand and value useable data;
- Equip agency staff with the skills and training needed to use data systems;
- Encourage agencies to identify and solve problems proactively;
- Allow agencies with hesitant leaders or stakeholders to pilot small-scale projects that demonstrate the value of integrated data systems.

In many local jurisdictions in Minnesota, longstanding data sharing between school districts and county agencies has ensured improvements for children. Similarly, after leading the construction of a new state-level integrated data system, I have had the pleasure of seeing agencies collaborate in newly valuable ways. Such cross-agency work spends tax dollars more wisely and reinvigorates public servants who are passionate to provide the best possible services.