



Making “Good Government” Great:

The Role of Integrated
Data Systems





Every government agency has data — in paper files, legacy systems and databases — it can use to help solve its community’s social problems and improve the lives of the people who live there.

However, government leaders are finding they cannot solve the challenges they face when agency data is siloed. Just like their private sector counterparts, these executives need the data in their legacy systems transformed into business intelligence they can use to make strategic decisions about where to target their resources.

Integrated data systems (IDSs), which enable information sharing among agencies, could be one solution to this obstacle. Due to the resource and legal considerations involved in implementing these systems, leadership support for interagency data sharing — especially from state attorneys general (AGs) — is critical to help state and local agencies move in this direction and realize more value from their data.

Some governments are already putting IDSs to good use. In Washington state, for example, the Attorney General’s Office created an IDS called HITS (homicide investigation tracking system) that pulls data from multiple law enforcement agencies into a single database, allowing cold cases to be reopened and new cases to be investigated more effectively.

IDS Defined:

An IDS, which can be overseen at the city, state or county government level, connects program data from multiple public service agencies and contracted service providers. It can link records on individuals across agencies, and over time provide a comprehensive view of constituent and family needs, as well as new insight into how government programs perform and interact with one another.

“The genesis of that system was a series of homicides that remained unsolved in part because agencies weren’t sharing data across jurisdictional lines,” says Rob McKenna, former attorney general for Washington state. “Once people understood what the problem was, they were persuaded to buy into a data sharing system they knew would benefit their own investigations, and more importantly, justice.”

Similar to Washington, AGs in other states can take a more proactive role in resolving conflicting interpretations of privacy law and preventing turf issues from interfering with agencies as they build an IDS.

To gauge the potential impact of IDSs and the role AGs can play in using their legal authority and expertise to clear away barriers to IDS development, the Governing Institute conducted exploratory research interviews with several AGs throughout the country. These AGs were identified based on their leadership in promoting responsible data sharing.

This paper highlights the research findings and discusses opportunities for AGs and other government leaders to work together to foster more data sharing and thereby establish the legal groundwork for IDS implementation that could drive better public policy outcomes.

What are Integrated Data Systems?

An IDS, which can be overseen at the city, state or county government level, connects program data from multiple public service agencies and contracted service providers. It can link records on individuals across agencies, and over time provide a comprehensive view of constituent and family needs, as well as new insight into how government programs perform and interact with one another.¹ Key systems that use an IDS to collaborate include correction and criminal justice systems, child welfare systems, workforce development systems and behavioral health systems.²

The breadth and depth of data shared in IDSs make them valuable tools for policy analysis, program planning and evaluation. As a result, agencies can better coordinate services or re-allocate resources to achieve better results and get the most out of taxpayer dollars.

“States are facing enormous fiscal pressure. If a state has less money to spend, data helps it manage scant resources,” says John Petrla, vice president of the Meadows Health Policy Institute in Dallas. Petrla is a data expert who has worked with and for governments to establish new data sharing initiatives, including when he served as general counsel and deputy commissioner to the New York State Office of Mental Health.

Cuyahoga County, Ohio, for example, used an IDS to improve outcomes for homeless women and children. Integrated data from the Office of Homeless Services and Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) helped the county understand its population of vulnerable families and their challenges. The county used this data to create the Partnering for Family Success program, which relies on an innovative funding model called “pay for success.” With this model, private and philanthropic investors fund evidence-based social programs that may lead to long-term cost savings for government agencies.

Through the program, the county implemented targeted, evidenced-based interventions to reduce the time children spend in foster care by helping to stabilize families and enabling caseworkers to make better, faster decisions about family reunification or an alternative permanent placement for children. This not only improves services to homeless mothers and their children but is predicted to save more than \$4 million in taxpayer dollars.³

Cuyahoga County illustrates how an IDS can be used to drive government innovation that can attract new private and philanthropic funding. This value add is critical in a time when governments face ongoing budget constraints, and it demonstrates that making a strategic investment in IDS implementation can build a foundation for improved public policy outcomes now and in the future.

The Current State of Integrated Data in Government

The demand for better, more responsive government is driving the need for more data sharing, but there are still several obstacles to creating the data sharing environment essential for IDS implementation. In our research, state AGs indicated the key challenges are lack of executive support, guidance and understanding; limited human resources; legacy systems; public perception and privacy issues; and lack of funding.

Another challenge is the legal parameters around sharing data. When former California Attorney General Kamala Harris was leading open data initiatives within the state, her team encountered this hurdle.

“Government agencies are trained to be very protective of their data, not because of ill will, but because of legal rules and attempting to stay out of trouble,” says Nathan Barankin, chief deputy to former Attorney General Harris.

Harris overcame this by using her position as AG to steadily build internal support, eventually issuing a set of guidelines⁴ to encourage data sharing between schools and child welfare agencies, launching the state’s Open Justice portal⁵ and negotiating data integration with the California Department of Social Services.

Similarly, Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman issued a formal opinion that addressed misconceptions about the scope of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), in order to confirm the legality of interagency data sharing in response to school safety concerns. Colorado’s Safe2Tell program allows students, schools, law enforcement and community members to share information about struggling youth to help prevent school violence.⁶ Coffman was prompted to take the unusual step of initiating a formal opinion because over the years people have expressed concerns about using the Safe2Tell tip line, fearing a possible violation of federal privacy laws.

“We decided to proactively issue that opinion and try to answer some of the questions that we’re frequently asked,” Coffman says. “This was an effort to say, ‘Don’t use FERPA as an excuse not to share information.’”

Coffman and Harris’ efforts show the larger role AGs can play in helping leadership coalesce around data sharing. Some of the biggest obstacles around implementing an IDS are leadership, risk management and public trust — all of which AGs and other state and local leaders can play a role in addressing.

Implementing & Capitalizing On IDS: Solutions and Opportunities for Progress

While AG support will be crucial, governments that want to implement an IDS also need to think enterprise wide, focus on privacy and data quality, and find synergies between state and federal law.

Think enterprise wide. Governments already manage many data sharing relationships — too many of them in an ad-hoc way that creates unnecessary administrative hassles and privacy vulnerabilities. AGs can use IDSs to promote a more thoughtful, fair and transparent approach to the use of data if they tackle IDS implementation at the enterprise level, rather than through one-off data relationships or data sharing agreements. An enterprise-wide approach creates a more secure and efficient process for sharing data to answer high-priority policy questions.

McKenna says it’s also important for agencies to break down silos to make better use of their data.

“One of the things they’ll learn is agencies probably already have a lot of the technology they need to do this. The problem is, too often the data is kept in individual technology silos, on different servers and inside different programs, but those programs can talk to each other in many cases,” he says. “It should result in less duplication of effort.”

KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR AG LEADERSHIP

There are several opportunities for AGs to serve as leaders when it comes to the use of integrated data systems.

Establish a model for more proactive collaboration.

Delaware is currently using grant funding to develop an IDS. The state benefits from a centralized legal representation model in which its Department of Justice (DOJ) Civil Division is responsible for providing civil representation to all of Delaware’s executive agencies. This structure supports a more collaborative approach to staffing its IDS project.

“As a team, deputy attorneys general (DAGs) — who represent individual IDS member agencies — review draft documents and consider corresponding legal questions. Strong communication within the team has allowed for the provision of consistent legal advice across agencies,” says Delaware Deputy Attorney General Sarah Goncher.

Even states that don’t have this centralized legal model can adapt an organizational model for their IDS implementation with representative stakeholders from each participating agency that fosters a similar type of collaboration.

Promote the value of an IDS. AGs first need to clearly establish a commitment that their office intends to see data sharing become a reality. Communicating the office’s interest, intent and priority will get other government officials on board.

“Political sponsorship is a good thing for fostering data sharing across agencies, which ideally should come from the governor’s office,” Petrilis says. “Minimally, political leadership should come from the head of the involved department, since high-level involvement makes achievement more likely.”

Another approach may involve providing additional education and training. Colorado AG Coffman says that in addition to the FERPA guidance, her office plans to coordinate training between local law enforcement and educators to communicate best practices and will issue a school legal manual with more information on how they can share information. The AG’s office, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services and the Colorado Department of Public Safety, also plans to make available a form for juvenile information sharing among schools, juvenile courts and law enforcement agencies. These types of resources could make participating agencies more comfortable with information sharing — and with an IDS that makes this process a lot easier.

Seek outside support. AGs can look to other state AGs who are already supporters of data integration and highlight best practices from their efforts to raise awareness. AGs in Wisconsin, Michigan and Massachusetts, for example, have been key in creating multidisciplinary task forces to address the opioid crisis and have advocated for “linkable data” from multiple sources to improve the ability of law enforcement, health care providers and public health agencies to work more collaboratively to save lives.

The Governing Institute’s research indicates that forming working groups of AGs, consulting with each AG’s CIO office and disseminating information during national AG meetings can bolster support for integrated data systems and encourage the development of resources — like toolkits, model agreements and guidelines — that can be disseminated to other agencies.



Focus on data quality. The Governing Institute research found a critical unmet need in supporting IDS implementation is having data in the right form and format so it is easily accessible by all departments.

“Data quality provides confidence in the underlying information,” McKenna says. “Everyone needs to believe the data they’re working with is accurate and up to date.”

Data is a strategic asset to government. Increasingly, mayors and governors are appointing chief data officers to ensure their administrations treat it accordingly. In addition, agencies should thoroughly audit their data to verify it is accurate, timely and useful.

Leverage new privacy guidelines to establish clear rules. Agencies can look to federal guidance from the Department of Education (DoE)⁷ and the Office of Management and Budget⁸ to navigate privacy issues. For instance, the DoE provides guidance on establishing a data governance framework and using de-identified and identifiable data that may be helpful for agencies.

Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy, a leading organization that focuses on the development of IDSs, also provides guidance on privacy issues related to implementation, including enlisting privacy advocates as direct stakeholders during the development process and assessing an agency’s current data maturity and data privacy policy.⁹

Other organizations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation,¹⁰ the National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO), the National Governor’s Association (NGA) and the National Association of Counties (NACo), all have valuable resources that can help guide agencies in this process. NGA, for example, has provided guidance on how to improve human services programs and outcomes through shared data,¹¹ while NACo has a website devoted to best practices around using and sharing data¹² and NASCIO has issued a report about “Better Decision-Making Through Data Sharing Agreements.”¹³

However, even with this guidance, agencies will need to align with federal and state privacy laws as they develop their IDSs, since current laws were not developed in coordination with one another and state laws that govern data issues were all written for specific substantive areas. It’s here that AG involvement is especially critical, Petrilu says.

“The role of the AGs should be to inform the executive branch and spread understanding that this kind of work is legal, possible and needed,” he says. “AGs have the power to short-circuit disagreements across agencies. They can do this by issuing a memorandum stating

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John Petrilu, Vice President, Meadows Health Policy Institute

that the AG believes data sharing and integration are valuable, and affirming that the sharing of data and data platforms are consistent with applicable federal and state law. Only an AG can issue something like that to quiet dissension.”

Conclusion

Integrated data systems allow governments to better leverage data to address public needs that cross agency boundaries. But adopting these systems requires time and resource investments, diligent governance, political sponsorship, interagency collaboration and diverse stakeholder support.

This is why AG involvement is pivotal. They can serve as leaders in enabling agencies to implement an IDS the right way to improve outcomes while protecting privacy. AGs sit at many cross-functional tables and are in the best position to provide legal — and actionable — guidance that facilitates more data sharing and makes agencies feel more comfortable working across real and perceived privacy boundaries. AGs can exercise enormous influence and accelerate processes within state agencies to implement an IDS. If an AG isn’t involved, some state agencies may not pursue innovation and will fall back on the old argument that sharing data and using integrated platforms are too risky.

AGs in several states already are playing a proactive role in helping agencies navigate potential legal hurdles as they build their IDSs, and convening AGs to share best practices may encourage others to follow their example. With active AG leadership, agencies can get beyond objections of “HIPAA or FERPA won’t let us do it,” and move the conversation about the value of integrated data forward, so these systems become part and parcel of the way governments serve their most vulnerable citizens.

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Endnotes

1. <http://www.aecf.org/m//resourcedoc/aecf-IDSPayForSuccessBriefOne-2017.pdf>
2. <https://www.aisp.upenn.edu/integrated-data-systems/>
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