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ChildNet: Cutting Red Tape for Kids

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 By [Erik Rhey](#)

For most of us, the term "red tape" signifies minor inconveniences or annoyances when, for example, we're renewing a driver's license, getting a passport, or waiting for a tax refund check. But to children in the child welfare system of South Florida, red tape once had disastrous effects. In the 1990s, kids were left to languish in shelters (instead of being placed in foster care or reunited with parents), and in some cases, abandoned in abusive households.

In fact, a May 1998 [article](#) in Fort Lauderdale's Sun-Sentinel newspaper detailed horrific injuries, deaths, and sexual assaults to South Florida children in the foster care system. In 1999, the Florida legislature declared the state's child welfare system officially broken and passed a law mandating sweeping reforms. Broward County appointed a committee to search for the answer to a damaged Department of Children & Families.

The result was [ChildNet](#), a "lead agency" that, according to its Web site, "manages the local system of services and supports for Broward's abused, abandoned, and neglected children and their caregivers." With the help of a forward-looking CEO, a partnership with printing and imaging giant Ricoh, and a custom-built document management strategy, ChildNet took a bureaucratic nightmare and turned it into a streamlined agency that digitized millions of documents, gave case workers wireless access, and reduced the amount of time kids spend in shelters by 87 percent.

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Drowning in a Sea of Paper

According to ChildNet CEO, Emilio Benitez, one big reason Broward County's child welfare system was failing its kids was because case workers were literally getting buried in paperwork, which begins the moment a child enters the system. Within 24 hours of a child arriving at ChildNet's assessment center, a case worker is assigned and a case is opened. While trying to find placement, the child undergoes a mental health assessment, family assessment, and so on. All of this generates "a voluminous number of documents," Benitez says, taking case workers, psychiatrists, and others to manage it all using a binder system.

"We used binders that are 5 to 6 inches thick and can contain 500 pages of records—and that's just one file," Benitez says. "Some cases require 2 or 3 binders. One child even had 72 volumes in his file!"

Aside from the time spent compiling and retrieving these forms, there's also the issue of where to store it all. Benitez says that ChildNet had to utilize costly off-site storage, particularly because of state requirements that the agency keep case files until a child's 30th birthday.

The second and more serious problem with all this paper is making it available to case workers outside the office. A day in the life of a child welfare worker often involves going to court hearings and performing home visitations. Benitez says case workers would lug multiple binders to court, trying to anticipate which forms a judge will request to review. And if that judge requested a document not on hand, it would delay court proceeding by hours and sometimes days. All this meant that kids often waited in limbo while the wheels of the system turned agonizingly slow.

For Benitez and his CFO, Dipak Parekh, the answer was immediately apparent: ChildNet needed to institute a document management system to digitize, organize, and make readily available its mountain of forms. A former federal court attorney, Benitez had already seen a transition to electronic documents there and

wanted to emulate that in the child welfare system. But with literally millions of case files, this was no meager task. So ChildNet put out a request for proposal—and Ricoh came to the rescue.

According to Murat Kilci, senior solutions consultant for Ricoh, the company created a customized system for ChildNet based on some core applications and equipment. First, he realized that ChildNet needed the muscle of enterprise-level hardware and software to tackle that kind of volume. So Ricoh started with creating a basic repository using Westbrook's Fortis software to capture, organize, and store documents. The second phase was a backfile conversion process to automate the scanning and data extraction, and to index document information for easy search and retrieval.

The work horses of the actual scanning process were three Fujitsu 5900-series scanners, which look like big laser printers, have 500-sheet feeders, and can scan an incredible 120 sheets per minute (and up to 10,000 sheets per day). ChildNet case workers deal with more than 425 distinct types of forms, all of which had to be scanned and made searchable. Also, these scanners work with Kofax's VRS scanning technology to ensure a crisp, legible image.

"Once a document is scanned," Kilci says, "VRS looks at the scanned image and can enhance it without user intervention. It can create a better-looking document than the original."

The documents are all saved as 300-dpi TIFF image files that are read-only. Workers can add sticky notes onto the docs, but the original integrity is maintained, satisfying both HIPAA and court requirements.

Another key capability is character recognition. The scanners run OCR (optical character recognition) on each page and index searchable terms and numbers, which were defined by ChildNet. Parekh says that there are seven ways to search for a document in the database, including parameters such as the birthdate of the mother or child, document type, case number, and a specific part of a document.

To make forms available to case workers outside the office, ChildNet outfitted them with Windows Mobile-based devices. Now if a worker needs a file in court, he or she can pull it up and print it right there in the courtroom. Also, workers can use their handhelds to take photos at visitations and collect signatures.

Getting Better

Yes, ChildNet and Ricoh have accomplished the Herculean task of digitizing their backlog of files, but they're not stopping there. Benitez says he wants to migrate the Web interface of the ChildNet database to Android devices to give workers more flexibility and device options. Also, Kilci at Ricoh is working on a streamlined electronic ticketing system that uses bar codes to further automate the digitization of documents. Case workers already have an internal "dashboard" to help them manage their workload, but Benitez says ChildNet is working on a Web dashboard that outside users can take advantage of to retrieve basic information on cases.

And though the team at Ricoh all agrees this project has been rewarding, there is one employee who understands this best. Eric Palmieri, Ricoh's customer relationship manager, and his wife are foster parents in Broward County. He says they have experienced first-hand "the stress and pain when one of the documents that we may have signed was misplaced or even lost." Thankfully, that has changed.

"I know that what we are doing at ChildNet will make the process of reviewing and signing documents, when a case worker comes to my house, a much easier and pleasant process."