

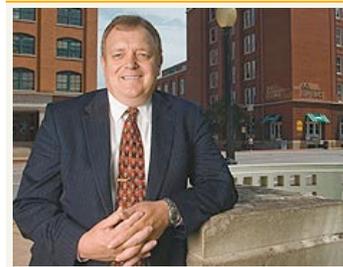
## Centralizing IT Systems

Amidst shrinking revenues and growing IT demands, counties collaborate to provide services to constituents and departments.

*Karen D. Schwartz*

Dallas County, Texas, has a juvenile case management system that's somewhat legendary in the state — so legendary, in fact, that when it came time for Tarrant and Bexar counties to upgrade their systems, county officials immediately asked Dallas County if they could enhance the system for their use.

With Dallas County's approval, the two counties evaluated the system and proposed something novel — a combined effort that involved pooling money and resources to develop one juvenile case management system that could be used by all three counties, as well as the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission.



"It takes time, education and a little muscle to change mindsets," says Dallas County CIO Robert Clines.

By joining forces, the counties and TJPC avoided spending the \$2 million to \$3 million each it would have taken to build or upgrade their systems. Instead, the counties spent a combined \$10 million, but got a system with many more capabilities and features than each could have afforded individually. And because the system is modular, the fact that one county may have a different court system or the other may have a unique jail facility isn't a problem; they can mix and match, implementing only what's necessary.

The model these three Texas counties employed — sharing services in a centralized fashion — is becoming more popular at all levels of state and local governments. In addition to cost savings and increased efficiency, sharing systems and services can help standardize and streamline systems and business processes, while leading to a more intelligent allocation of resources. Some benefits are even greater, so great that it's impossible to put a price on them.

Take the case of the Juvenile Case Management System. "The ability to have insight into what our juveniles are doing is phenomenally powerful," says Robert Clines, CIO of Dallas County. "We've got a site set up that's a cross-jurisdictional search, where we can enter a name or M.O. [modus operandi] into the system, and it will give us known associates, mug shots and other data we have on someone. We can even exchange the location of where arrests or crimes are committed, represented on a map. Soon, you can see a pattern, which can lead to capturing criminals more quickly."

Oakland County, Mich., adopted a centralized approach decades ago, making it the de facto way of doing business in the county. Information technology-based services are centered on a centralized IT department with 150 full-time IT personnel and dozens of contractors. The county's department of information technology uses a detailed master planning and evaluation process to decide which programs should be centrally developed and administered.

The process usually starts with an agency voicing a request. Based on that, planners go through a detailed scope and approach process, gathering high-level requirements and leveraging the technology and expertise gained by previous efforts.

A current project in the county involves replacing a legacy off-the-shelf document imaging solution with a custom-

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developed solution based on Microsoft's .NET architecture.

"It will be more cost-effective, and we'll be able to scale it across the [county]," explains Scott Oppmann, manager of application services for the IT department.

Another area of success for shared services in Oakland County is in the geospatial arena, where systems have been built to hold land-related records, address data, aerial and imagery data, and even data on storm water quality. A variety of departments use the system, and Oppmann says the system is much more efficient and useful than standalone systems ever were.

Cost savings for centralized services and systems vary and can be hard to quantify, but they are real. In the geospatial area alone, Oppmann says, the county has saved somewhere between three to seven times the cost of the constituent service.

## When Does Centralization Make Sense?

Although there are significant benefits to centralizing IT-based services, it's not always the right decision. In some cases, the traditional decentralized model, in which every department manages its own system, makes more sense.

In general, some overarching functions related to finance, human resources or document imaging tend to be better candidates for centralization. Functions that tend to be common across departments also are good candidates.

"Almost every department needs to store images and be able to distribute them at will to their customers," Clines notes.

On the other hand, some functions of state and local government are not a good fit. These include systems very specific to an agency, those sensitive in nature such as homeland security-related systems, or those that are simply ingrained legacy systems.

"When one group has done it one way forever and become so entrenched in that way of doing business that they are incapable or unwilling to change the way they do business, it's not worth it," Clines says.

It also depends on the culture. In some government structures, such as Oakland County, there isn't much choice — the IT department's mission is determining ways to create efficiencies through shared services, and unless there is a good reason not to, that's what's going to happen.

In other governments, such as the city of Arlington, Texas, departments tend to be more independent, with much more input on what they can and cannot control. In that case, "it's a negotiation as to where it ends up," says Tim Barbee, director of research and information services at the North Central Texas Council of Governments and former CIO of Arlington.

Implementation challenges notwithstanding, the idea of centralization is catching on in Dallas County. Now that the juvenile case management system is a clear success, "My boss said, 'Why don't we use the same process for our financial systems?'" Clines says.

## How to Succeed at Shared Services

- Appeal to departmental heads and let them know you're not threatening their empire, but simply trying to enable their department.
- Form a brain trust: a group of people who think the same way. If you have to convince your stakeholders, the project will be doomed to failure.
- The centralized IT model must be aligned with existing governance and funding mechanisms.
- Demonstrate value whenever possible.
- Function as much like a service bureau as possible: impartial, standardized and professional.
- Recognize your government's culture and fit your model to the culture.
- Be vigilant: it's easy to slip back into the old way of doing things.

### WEB EXCLUSIVE

#### Challenges of Centralized IT Governance

When the culture of sharing information technology services across governmental organizations is ingrained and accepted, implementation should be fairly straightforward. But if it's a new concept, as it is in many jurisdictions, collaboration may be an uphill battle.

Control is perhaps the biggest issue. "People tend to say, 'It's my data, and I want to administer it. You might ruin our data if you get your hands on it.' It's a cultural thing, and it takes time, education and a little muscle to change

mindsets,” says Robert Clines, CIO of Dallas County, Tex. “Often, the only control we have is money, so we’ll explain that if their direction is in line with the functionality we’re offering, we’ll support it, but if it isn’t, they will have to figure out how to fund their project elsewhere.”

The state of Arizona continues to face that challenge. The state traditionally has taken a decentralized approach to projects, but starting with an edict from the governor, executives have been trying to change that. Decision makers have settled on a hybrid model, in which the state’s IT department plays a role in the strategic side of centralizing appropriate projects, while individual projects are managed by the agencies themselves, with oversight from the state IT department.

“We’re on the path toward more collaboration and clustering of projects, but we’re relatively new at this, so it’s taking some time,” says Chris Cumiskey, CIO of Arizona’s Government Information Technology Agency. “But basically, the governor says it’s foolish to have large agencies doing the same kind of activities. Why can’t we foster a scenario where the health cluster or agencies would be able to enter eligibility information just once for the same person, for example?”

So far, the state seems to be succeeding. One shining example is Arizona 2-1-1, an online portal to help citizens find resources for child care, jobs, health care and insurance, as well as emergency bulletins and alerts. The system includes information and input from about 20 state departments, including health and human services, emergency preparedness, and homeland security. Now that the project is a clear success, Cumiskey plans to forge on, creating more opportunities for shared services.

Arizona is moving along, and it has asked each agency to submit three projects that it believes would be good candidates for shared services. With that information, the state IT department will create a pilot of the programs that it determines would work well together.

*Karen D. Schwartz*

