

Decoding Data to Help Youth Workers

Little-known analytic system makes case monitoring better and faster.

By John Kelly

In juvenile justice and child welfare, it is usually the extremes – sweeping reforms and devastating scandals – that garner attention.

Either end of that spectrum is often arrived at because of the way workers execute their most fundamental duties: timely contact with youths, families and courts.

A little-publicized brand of technology called SafeMeasures® has made monitoring and scheduling those contacts far easier, some state and county leaders say, by maximizing one of the most valuable commodities in youth work: time.

The data analysis system, owned and operated by the Children's Research Center (CRC), provides a tickler system for caseworkers and allows supervisors to monitor performance nearly in real time. Leaders in New Jersey, California and Virginia have come to swear by the technology as cuts in budgets and staffs put pressure on their systems to do more with less.

The Beginning

The seed for SafeMeasures was planted in the late 1990s, when the Department of Health and Human Services started to require that states report performance on outcome measures related to the stability of foster care and ability to connect children to permanent placements. The feds helped states pay for and develop reporting systems that would send better information up the chain to HHS.

The problem was that none of that information got back to the local offices that actually

do the work. "The information stayed at high levels, and most of the work to improve will occur at local offices," said Pete Quigley, who oversees SafeMeasures as vice president of information services for the Madison, Wis.-based CRC, which is a division of the nonprofit National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

"Our thought process was, if we could analyze [the data], we could feed it back on a rapid cycle to line workers, office managers and supervisors," Quigley said. "Rapid" was the key word, because offices would "have to know what's going on with cases *now* in order to act" on the information.

Case information "becomes ancient history" in a couple weeks, said Scott Reiner, the head of juvenile probation for the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice.

In 2002, CRC signed its first contract to implement SafeMeasures for the child welfare system in Orange County, Calif. It now serves the child welfare departments of almost every county in California, all of New Jersey and Hennepin County (Minneapolis) in Minnesota. Virginia was the first state to adopt SafeMeasures on the juvenile justice side (for all of its probation offices), and the Virginia child welfare system has since contracted with CRC as well.

How It Works

When a site contracts to use SafeMeasures, Quigley and his team spend a few months connecting that state or county's databases to their own analytics system, which is housed at the NCCD Children's Research Center in Madison.

Once they are connected, CRC is periodically sent huge quantities of information. What comes into the Madison office would be essentially useless to an individual caseworker or probation officer, said Molly Armstrong, a consultant who used to serve as the director of policy and planning at the New Jersey Department of Children and Families.

The state database "collects an enormous amount of data, but most of it is invisible to a manager," Armstrong said. "You could look at an independent case, but the database is not organized to do tracking."

CRC staff members then aggregate and analyze the state's information, and return it in a web-based format. The state sends CRC information for all of the counties at once, but CRC returns the data broken down by counties or regional units.

This process reveals compliance information from the top down. Take meetings between probation officers and juvenile offenders in Virginia, for example:

Twice a week, when Reiner gets his update from SafeMeasures, he knows what percentage of all court-ordered meetings between probation offi-

SafeMeasures® At a Glance

Who Does It: The nonprofit Children's Research Center, Madison, Wis.

Cost: \$100,000 to \$500,000 per year, depending on size of county and amount of customization.

Current Clients:

California Department of Social Services (54 of 58 counties)
Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice
Virginia Department of Social Services
New Jersey Department of Children and Families
Hennepin (Minneapolis) County Child Protection Services

Benefits:

For state leadership: View performance at the state level and drill down to view the performance of regional or county managers.

For supervisors: Gauge performance of their office against others on a number of measures. For child welfare systems, this generally includes visits and court appearances. Juvenile justice systems can monitor probation contacts, detention admissions and length of stay for youths in the system.

For line staff members: View which youths in their caseload are due for contact.

In emergencies: SafeMeasures has added mapping capabilities, which some California counties have used to monitor children in care near forest fire areas. In a more common emergency, such as an apartment fire, a supervisor could use SafeMeasures to quickly determine which children lived in the building.

cers and juveniles took place. In Loudoun County, Va., court services unit director Mark Crowley and probation supervisor Mark Alexander can see how many meetings were missed by their 14 probation officers (they have lost four officers this past year to budget cuts). And those probation officers can log into SafeMeasures to find out two things: what meetings they might have missed, and what juveniles are due for meetings in the near future.

The problem that SafeMeasures can solve for both child welfare and juvenile justice systems becomes clear when one considers what came before the technology. In Virginia, probation directors had to review all cases every 90 days.

"All agencies have standards and procedural practices to ensure quality services: how often probation kids are seen, families are met, case files reviewed, whether a child is being incarcerated," said Reiner. "Those are the regulations that make sure we do at least a minimal quality job."

The Old Paper Chase

One of Reiner's regional directors, Tom Spry, said he had made up his own system to review cases in the five counties he oversees. The Spry system involved a lot of travel time and paper chasing.

"I had to be where the folder and case were to look at folders and review them," he said.

Spry would visit each office regularly. On every case he reviewed during a visit, he'd write the next date he intended to review that case on the top of the case folder. The staff at that office was responsible for pulling the folders scheduled for review next time he visited that office.

Child welfare caseworkers in New Jersey and California had to pick through the state database or their own paper files to stay organized on what cases needed attention next.

At best, those tasks took forever to complete; at worst, they

weren't completed, and the work of people on the front line was unchecked and unorganized.

"In theory, you could do this stuff by paper [files], but anyone who tells you that everything gets done when it's on paper is full of you-know-what," said Armstrong, the former New Jersey official. "You have all these hearings, all these services, all these events. Every case has 100 things you have to manage."

SafeMeasures has essentially eliminated those problems, clients said. Supervisors can check the progress of all workers, from their desks, through reports that arrive two times (or more) a week. Caseworkers and probation officers need not craft a schedule of visits out of their folders.

"It's a supervisor's dream," said Alexander. "It allows us to look at the work that people are doing without hundreds of files. It should also be a dream for all probation officers, because they can check their own work by sitting in front of a computer."

Workers who still let crucial contacts lapse do so at far more peril. "All these things that we monitor are required," said Reiner. "You can't hide anymore, and you shouldn't have been able to hide before."

It isn't about threatening workers' jobs as much as knowing who needs help, said Wayne McLelland, who oversees probation for three Virginia counties. "It allows us to see who we need to help and who might be mentors to other workers. I can take a seasoned worker and help bring someone else along."

Without SafeMeasures, he said, it "takes you longer to figure some of this stuff out."

In New Jersey, the fact that workers can see one another's information on SafeMeasures has fostered a healthy dose of competition and peer pressure in child welfare offices.

"Everyone knew someone in their unit who sat in their chair and didn't go out in the field," Armstrong said. "All of a sudden, that became very difficult."

Is System for Everyone?

Is bringing in SafeMeasures a no-brainer?

New Jersey paid CRC to implement SafeMeasures when it agreed to reforms to settle a class-action lawsuit, knowing the state would need to track progress on some outcome measures.

There are some limitations. For starters, the service provided by CRC is only as good as the data sent to it.

"When I got [to New Jersey], they were not using it for much of anything," Armstrong said. That was because the data sent back by CRC was obviously inaccurate. "If the underlying data isn't good, people stop paying attention."

Armstrong had to persuade supervisors to commit to tracking information on SafeMeasures and on paper for a while to figure out where the miscommunication was occurring. It turned out that many caseworkers had not been trained on how to enter visits into the state system, and a few of the screen pages were unnecessarily complicated.

That is a common experience, Quigley confirmed. "Part of what we do is help sort out what is just bad data," he said. "It's kind of important to help people understand that some improvement is just improved data."

There is also the question of money. Quigley said SafeMeasures costs around \$100,000 on the low side and \$400,000 on the high side, depending on the size of a system and the amount of customized reports the jurisdiction wants. That is

an annual cost; CRC does not sell the technology.

The cost-effectiveness of Virginia paying CRC in perpetuity for SafeMeasures "has been the subject of some discussion here," Reiner acknowledged. "Paying them for development and then bringing it in house ... is not an option we were presented with when we got started."

The other option, Reiner said, was for Virginia to build its own system, which meant that once it was built it would require the state only to pay the salaries of the people doing the analysis.

"I believe our in-house staff could do a decent job of developing a comparable product," Reiner said, "but they have had numerous other priorities as well."

Michigan chose to build its own, said Armstrong, who is now assisting that state in its attempt to make changes as a result of a lawsuit. "Michigan [Department of Human Services] happens to have an unbelievably talented head of its data unit, and to have folks on staff that can do this kind of work," she said.

New Jersey did not have the same internal advantages, and Armstrong said CRC's price and motivation made it easy to choose outsourcing.

"They're not trying to make millions off the product," Armstrong said. "And they're very, very customer service-oriented. They just work with you."

Contact: CRC (608) 831-1180, www.nccd-crc.org. For a demonstration of SafeMeasures, visit: <http://demo.safemeasures.org>.

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