

Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department: Public Information Sharing Tools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study delves into the implementation, successes, challenges, and resources of Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD), associated with the implementation and maintenance of the Public Information Share Tool, which provides transparency of the department's impact and support to the community. The tool could be a model for the County of Monterey Department of Social Services to consider as it finalizes an internal dashboard this summer and strategically plans next steps that includes a public-facing dashboard.

Many social service departments receive data requests regarding who is served in the county for a multitude of reasons. These requests may take time to coordinate extraction of data from systems and at least one staff member to validate the information when a dashboard or report with the information needed is not readily available. In 2018, Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) established a Data Council. The EHSD launched their Program and Data Dashboard on their county website. This was the first stepping stone towards what is now their innovative visualization Public Information Sharing Tools, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Mapping that provides program data by

Board of Supervisor District, zip code, and city along with an Interactive Dashboard with program household and individual statistics, trends, and narrative.

“The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insight.” – Carly Fiorina

Introduction

In 2024, Contra Costa EHSD brought together critical parties within the organization who share data. This Data Council models their goals, responsibilities, work plans, and timelines for continuous improvement of an Interactive Program Data Dashboard and GIS Benefits Program Map. This is a model for the County of Monterey to consider as it finalizes an internal dashboard and plans for the possibility of an external dashboard.

During the April 17, 2024 Data Council 2.0 meeting, it was apparent that the council had brought together critical parties within the organization who share data, model the goals and responsibilities of the Data Council Charter, including report presentation, sources of different data, time management, work plan review and goals for continuous improvement of their Interactive Program Data Dashboard and GIS Benefits Program Map. A model for the County of Monterey to consider as it finalizes an internal dashboard and plans for the possibility of an external dashboard.

Background and Timeline

In 2018, EHSD began enhancing its data management practices by establishing a Data Council. This council included the department’s Executive Team who were tasked with exploring legacy dashboards and ensuring data accuracy was validated by the bureaus within the department.

The Journey Towards Enhanced Data Visualization:

In 2019, the EHSD Program and Data Dashboards were published on the county website, marking a significant milestone in allowing the public to view program data information, monthly trends, and narratives (see Appendix Figure 1).

In 2021, EHSD Policy & Planning team operating under the Information & Systems Bureau, took proactive steps to develop advanced data visualization capabilities, which laid out the groundwork for the Interactive Dashboard project.

In 2022, the Interactive Dashboard and EHSD GIS Map designs were reviewed in a collaborative effort with the EHSD Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Team, Contra Costa Health Services, community stakeholders, and Board of Supervisors staff.

In 2023, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors approved the launch of EHSD Public Information Sharing Tools Landing Page (see Appendix Figure 2).

In 2024, the Data Council 2.0 was established. It meets monthly and includes Policy and Planning staff along with data managers who review trend analyses, insights, and discuss issues for effective decision-making. The meeting structure, goals, and responsibilities are thoroughly outlined in the EHSD Data Council Charter. Projects are added to their 2024 Work Plan with timelines that also serve as a visual reference for their goals.

Success of Public Information Tools

Several successes have resulted in the development of these tools. The EHSD Director has quick and easy access to review data. The website can be displayed at the Board of Supervisors (BOS) meetings during EHSD presentations which helps tell the story of individuals served. It also provides trend reports and highlights any or all rising service programs within the county, while maintaining confidentiality and allowing the public to download and print information. For example, one of the programs highlighted for EHSD is CalFresh in which over 100,000 individuals have been served as of October 2023 (Contra Costa Health Services, 2024). Additionally, the BOS can easily view their district if desired. The tools also provide the opportunity to elaborate on program benefits issued and contributions to the county's economy. Another added benefit is the potential use by community-based organizations for grants, along with researchers, policymakers, and advocates. In addition, community involvement and collaboration continue to strengthen understanding and transparency. Additionally, EHSD received recognition from the National Association of Counties (NACo) in 2023, honoring the department with an Achievement Award for its Public Information Sharing Tools: EHSD Benefits Program GIS Map and Interactive Program Data Dashboard.

Resources

The Contra Costa County EHSD staffing for this project includes a DoIT staff member for mapping, an Information & System Director, a Research and Evaluation Manager, and an additional team member

who pulls data from multiple systems including individual and household data. The team manages projects, data analytics, planning, performance measures, outcome reports, and ensures data is validated against statistics reported to the California Department of Social Services and California Department of Health Care Services. The skill of the group is a vital component for items such as coding, data visualization tools, specifically Tableau in their county, and thorough validation of data.

Learnings

- Importance of Data Validation and Alignment: Effective data management hinges on the accuracy and consistency of information to demonstrate transparency and earn trust from the end user who may easily view data from state websites.
- Tableau upskilling is crucial: Investing in training and upskilling staff members in data visualization tools is essential so the department can enhance their ability to create visually compelling and user-friendly data dashboards.
- Emphasize Personally Identifiable Information (PII) considerations early: Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of individuals served by social services is essential to comply with privacy regulations and safeguarding of sensitive information. Implementation measures such as zoom-in limits, masking counts below a certain threshold such as <20, and layering granularity helps prevent inadvertent disclosure.

- Stakeholder engagement, internal and external is a must: Successful implementation of data visualization tools relies on active engagement of internal stakeholders (e.g., leadership and department staff that can provide input) and external stakeholders (e.g., community-based organizations and other departments or governing bodies). The feedback and input from a diverse range of stakeholders throughout the development process helps meet the needs of end users and enhance their relevance and usability.

Recommendation

The EHSD Public Sharing Tools successfully provide a story of individuals served and trends for the public providing transparency. Roadshows within their own staff are underway to ensure their internal staff are aware of the Public Sharing Tools as well. As the Department of Social Services works to implement an internal dashboard this summer, it is crucial to identify best practices from EHSD for an external dashboard. It is recommended to establish a Data Council by the end of this year. This council should identify appropriate staff, create a collaborative planning team, and set structured goals for the upcoming year. This will ensure that input is received and considered while maintaining accountability for the project. In addition, the county will need to determine if there is staffing within the Department of Social Services Information Technology (DSS IT) to not only implement but also sustain maintenance of a public sharing tool, which may cause additional department costs if increased staff or training is required. Another option to consider due to recent budget constraints is

an assessment of what information to post such as a smaller scale. Using the 2018 EHSD model as a starting point could help to achieve approval and implementation of a public-facing dashboard by the beginning of the 25/26 Fiscal Year, which would also be an added benefit to the County of Monterey outreach strategies.

Conclusion

This case study underscores the importance of a holistic approach to data visualization in social services, including data validation, skill development, privacy consideration, and stakeholder engagement. By embracing this innovation, and establishing the correct positions to implement and maintain, departments can leverage data visualization tools to promote transparency and improve service delivery within the county collaboratively, which would include the use of a mobile office with interview room space. Additionally, it will assist with the long-term outreach goals and coordinated efforts with community based organizations and availability for BOS meetings to provide insight into the work conducted by the department throughout the county which occupies an area of a little under 3,300 square miles of land. Readily available benefit issuance statistics will also assist in informing the public of the contribution that the benefits provide to families and the local economy.

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Appendix

Figure 1: EHSD Program and Data Dashboard

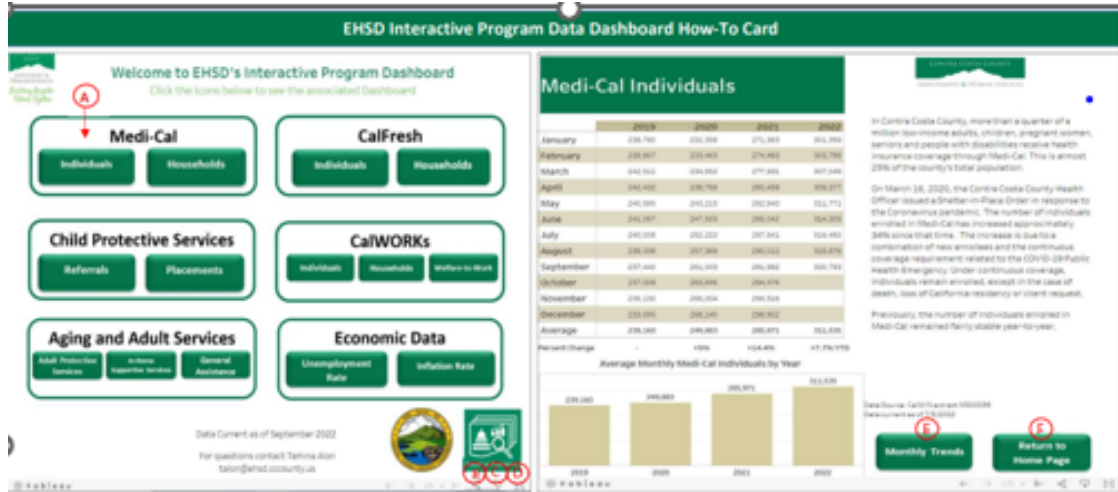


Figure 2: EHSD Public Information Sharing Tools Landing Page

