

ISSUES TO WATCH

The former director of the California Department of Health Care Services, **Jennifer Kent** has held multiple leadership positions in the health and human services (HHS)



field, with experience in both the public and private sectors. Now a senior fellow with the Center for Digital Government, Kent discusses how HHS agencies can benefit from automation tools.

In your career, you have seen a lot of changes in HHS. Where do you see new automation tools fitting in?

Automation has a role to play in helping expedite data analysis. Historically, HHS agencies are used to getting siloed data. But a new dawn is breaking where all these agencies are trying to integrate their data feeds and use more sophisticated data analytics to understand who their populations are and figure out who the cross-tabulated users are.

Automation can also help put data in a consumable form. Many agencies struggle to use data when they're making policy decisions or designing programs that target specific populations. I struggled with this as a state agency director. We would be under the gun to provide something for the governor's budget or make a deadline, and the data folks often couldn't give us what we needed when we needed it.

How might automation in HHS lead to better services and outcomes for constituents?

Automation can lead to better targeting for programs and less work for constituents. If you are low income, why do you have to fill out the same information in four different places for services? In many cases, government has put the burden on the consumer to seek out different pieces of information and fill out more forms in slightly different ways. Government should be saying, "You have approached us for help in one area, so you should have consideration given to you for other programs for which you look to be eligible."

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Some attempts have been made to do that, but they're not consistent, they're not statewide, or they're not in all states. I would like to see that done better.

Can automation help attract and retain a talented HHS workforce?

Yes. For starters, our workforce is aging. People aren't going into government like they used to. Public service is difficult at all levels, and the private sector offers compensation that public agencies can't compete with. What can you do to make employees feel more appreciated? One way is to remove some of the more annoying administrative, repetitive tasks with automation.

When I started at my department in 2015 as director, we still processed all Medicaid provider applications by paper. We had walls and walls of paper applications, and our processing timeframe was really long. By launching an intuitive application portal that auto-populated fields, we dropped our processing time from months to an average time of 15 or 16 days. It was not just good for the providers. It was much better for staff because they could focus on more important things.

From an administrative and policy perspective, what should one keep in mind when it comes to automation in HHS?

Technology projects are some of the most frustrating for local and state

agencies. They're high risk and high reward. Anyone doing an automation project should probably start small to demonstrate both progress and success. If you can do it in a bite-sized approach, it allows upper management to have faith that the next attempt will be handled appropriately.

Do you have any other thoughts or advice for agencies moving forward?

Employees, especially new graduates, who are coming into public service will want tools. For HHS agencies in general, this is how you convince people to stick with public service in the long haul: tools that can help them do their job better.

For example, in the case of child welfare and social workers, there's a lot you could do to make their jobs easier. How can you allow for case files to be updated using transcription services, so that people don't have to write or take notes? How can you flag certain things in a social worker's daily schedule or case file when kids pop up into a higher tier of risk? Some of these things can be the difference between someone keeping their job or going somewhere else with less stress or administrative burden. On the constituent side, if you miss a kid who's at risk, the situation might have a tragic outcome. While technology like automation isn't necessarily going to singlehandedly protect a child from abuse, it will allow someone to do their job at their highest capacity.