

# ACF's Interoperability Action Plan

The Administration for Children & Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) has long recognized that enhanced interoperability for effective and efficient data sharing is necessary to attain large scale operational efficiencies and to improve outcomes for those we serve. Both of these objectives are broadly supported priorities across all levels government.

At the federal level, the cultural shift toward more strategic use of our data assets is highlighted by major initiatives, such as the bipartisan Commission for Evidence-Based Policymaking and Health & Human Services (HHS) Secretary Azar's Reimagine HHS initiative. In addition, HHS has already established a strong foundation for supporting interoperability efforts that benefit health and human service programs through agencies including the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

In May of 2017, Acting Assistant Secretary Steve Wagner formalized ACF's vision and commitment to leverage the power of data to transform lives and improve human service delivery by establishing the ACF Interoperability Action Plan (IAP). The implementation of this plan positions ACF as a leader in this transformation in a manner that spans organizational and jurisdictional boundaries across the human services spectrum. As a government agency entrusted by the public to collect, manage, use, and share information, it is incumbent on ACF to engage in lawful sharing (and to permit sharing by our partners and grantees) of information for the benefit of our clients.

Among the key benefits of data integration is improving the ability to share and reuse data for multiple purposes that can meet the diverse and evolving needs of human service organizations and the clients they serve, without requiring expensive and disruptive changes to the data systems and technology our partners rely on every day.

ACF is pursuing integration of human services data systems and processes by addressing impediments to sharing information and harmonizing standards and guidelines to promote innovation and advancement. ACF will actively work to implement and expand information sharing across programs and levels of government in a manner that meets human services business needs, minimizes cost and complexity, maximizes reuse of promising practices, and complies with all applicable laws and regulations.

The ACF Interoperability Action Plan (IAP) contains several directives.

- All ACF programs and ACF program leadership will actively pursue actions that allow and encourage states, tribes, and other partners to share data, including the removal of barriers that prevent legal, ethical, and authorized data sharing for the benefit of clients served by these programs.

- ACF program offices will actively seek out opportunities to enhance and support integrated data initiatives such as coordinated case management and data-informed decision making – especially solutions that address multi-program needs.
- ACF recognizes that a majority of client-facing work is performed by partners and grantees and that ACF has a considerable role in proactively helping them share data more effectively. ACF will pursue a holistic approach to ensure our efforts are comprehensive and coordinated.
- ACF will continue to expand efforts to make data available for research, evaluation, cross-program outcome measurement, and other statistical purposes to inform policy-making and program improvement.

ACF also recognizes that the attainment of these directives, many of them longstanding priorities, requires a fresh approach. Individually, programs may have limited funding or staff to pursue cross-program or cross-sector interoperability. Previous efforts often relied on *ad hoc* partnerships. Even when successful, these arrangements may be impermanent and lack flexibility to expand in scope to meet the needs of other programs and external stakeholders.

To address these challenges, ACF established the Division of Data and Improvement (DDI) in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), bringing together a cross-disciplinary team to bridge the gaps and address challenges to data sharing in a holistic manner. DDI approaches interoperability and data sharing by incorporating the lenses of policy, practice, privacy, and technology in a way that focuses on the whole person/whole family. DDI now has a key role in supporting the human services enterprise in implementation of this IAP.

The Action Plan outlines six steps:

1. **Coordination**— OPRE/DDI is tasked with:
  - Leading the ACF Interoperability Initiative
  - Coordinating a new Community of Interest
  - Serving as ACF’s liaison to other HHS operating divisions, federal departments, and external stakeholders on the subject of multi-program interoperability and data sharing
  - Providing coordination support, tools, and limited technical assistance for program offices
  - Incorporating an evaluation component and tracking progress toward these shared objectives
  - Coordinating efforts to comply with data exchange standards requirements from Congress or OMB.
2. **Data Sharing First**—ACF and its program offices will develop and implement a Data Sharing First (DSF) strategy that starts with the assumption that data sharing is in the public interest. ACF will encourage and promote data sharing broadly, constrained only when required by law or when there are strong *bona fide* prohibitions.

3. **Interoperability Initiative**—Each ACF office will participate and contribute to ensure a coordinated and consensus-based approach through identifying shared objectives as a community and leveraging each other’s expertise.
4. **Community of Interest**—ACF convened a community of interest inclusive all ACF program offices to inform and advance the IAP and will make periodic reports to ACF leadership on decisions, recommendations, and proposed actions. DDI will provide coordination and technical support for this group, known as the Human Services Data Integration Solutions Community (HSDISC).
5. **Program Office Actions**—Every ACF program office will identify current efforts and catalog opportunities related to data sharing and integration, with a priority on addressing cross-program interoperability needs. Progress will be tracked at an agency level with reports to the Assistant Secretary starting on a quarterly basis.
6. **Program Administration and Evaluation Improvements**—OPRE will support and expand efforts to catalog, assess, and promote the broader use of federal administrative data in consultation with the Department’s ReImagine HHS Data initiative, and the HHS Data Council to support the goal of ‘collect once and reuse,’ avoiding duplicative data collection; streamlining data reporting requirements from grantees and contractors; expanding the accessibility of administrative data for research and other statistical purposes; facilitating record linking across data sets where feasible; and enable rapid-cycle evaluation and continuous quality improvement in a multi-program manner.

## Summary

Interoperability, or the ability to integrate and share data, is an essential element in the delivery of effective human service programs. This action plan represents a starting point for achieving an integrated human services ecosystem and will evolve as we learn and grow. This effort will succeed only if we work collectively to achieve it, and ACF stands ready to do our part to help make this vision a reality.

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