



Wireless Technology Keeps Foster Children Safer

About Our Kids

Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Inc is a non-profit corporation created in response to the need for local control and leadership of Florida's foster care system. It is the local lead agency for child welfare in Miami and the Keys. Our Kids oversees and coordinates care for abused, abandoned and neglected children and their families in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

Situation

Ensuring that the thousands of Florida children in foster care receive appropriate services was a big challenge for child welfare agencies. After the disappearance of a little girl in foster care that went unnoticed for almost two years, Florida mandated that workers must see each foster child at least once every 30 days. Our Kids began looking for ways to document case workers' visits while reducing paperwork and facilitating communication with the doctors, courts and other service providers involved in the child's care.

Solution

Case workers from seven agencies affiliated with Our Kids use OK Connect, an application that lets them access internal applications and the Internet using laptops that connect to the AT&T mobile broadband network by tethering to wireless smartphone devices. The solution provides phone and Internet access, GPS navigation, resource files, a camera and case management tools that make it easy for workers to document services and enter other data during home visits. Home visits have increased by 30 percent since the technology was deployed. Case worker productivity has also risen as the reliability of the wireless network has allowed them to stay connected throughout the day and comply with state reporting requirements in a timely fashion.

From Frustration to Accountability

More than 800,000 U.S. children spend time in foster care each year, many as a result of parental abuse or neglect. On average, a child will spend 28 months in foster care and change homes once or twice each year.

Florida's foster care system made national headlines after a child named Rilya Wilson went missing in 2001. Officials didn't notice the four-year-old's disappearance for almost two years because her case worker falsified home visit reports. Florida Gov. Charlie Crist expressed the anguish and frustration felt by many when he told the state legislature, "We have done a better job in this country tracking packages than we have tracking the children placed in our care."

The case led to massive reform efforts resulting in the privatization of Florida's child welfare system and the creation of Our Kids to oversee and lead a coordinated system of care for abused, abandoned and neglected children and their families in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. Our Kids works to bring accountability and transparency to the child welfare system in these counties, but keeping track of the thousands of children who move in and out of the welfare system as their family's situation changes is a herculean task. Officials began searching for a way to ensure supervision for each child by validating every home visit.

Our Kids Facts

- **Business Needs**
Provide accountability and better care for foster children by documenting case workers' monthly visits
- **Networking Solution**
Mobile application on AT&T's wireless network for secure and reliable access to tools and applications
- **Business Value**
Enhanced accountability and increased productivity
- **Industry Focus**
Social Services
- **Size**
250 case workers serving 3,800 children



The agency also sought to relieve the paperwork burden that state and federal regulations place on social workers and at the same time make it easier for them to communicate with all the doctors, courts and other service providers involved in the child's care. "The goal is to try to free them up so that they can spend as much time as possible with their clients, the children and the families," stated Our Kids Executive Director Frances Allegra.

A Lack of Basic Mobility Tools

Our Kids officials began shadowing case workers to better understand their needs and saw that many of the workers lugged massive case files with them to court and home visits, along with big desktop calendars to record the appointments they needed to track for their clients.

Our Kids CIO Patricia K. Smith said the exercise showed clearly that workers lacked basic mobility tools. "It reminded me of insurance salesmen back in the 1950s. They'd drive around with a car full of paper, with little notes here and forms there and no real ability to keep track of their jobs," she said.

A series of focus groups gave case workers the chance to experiment with walkie-talkies, handheld personal digital assistants, cell phones and smartphones, along with a range of portable computers, ultrathin notebooks and tablet PCs.

After case workers used all the devices, a consensus emerged. "Instead of having one magic wand device, they wanted a smartphone and a really light laptop," Our Kids IT Project Manager Jorge Fernandez said.

"Wow, What an Idea!"

The result was the Our Kids system, known as OK Connect, which outfitted case workers with lightweight Panasonic Toughbook® laptops and Samsung BlackJack™ II smartphones that provide remote access to tools and applications.

AT&T suggested that Xora GPS TimeTrack™ software, which had been used in the construction industry to document the progress of projects, could be adapted to meet the needs of welfare case workers. CIO Smith immediately saw the possibilities for Our Kids. "We thought, 'Wow, what an idea!' We can use this technology to go into the home, take a picture of the child that is GPS-stamped, date-stamped and time-stamped to validate the visit," she said, "So we forever have a record of that visit." The photos are then wirelessly uploaded to the State of Florida's child welfare system to document each child's condition.

OK Connect allows workers to navigate efficiently to children's homes and monitor mileage to and from locations; the solution also automates time documentation for the case workers. "It tracks where you go, what time you get there and what time you leave," case worker Karen Sanchez commented, automatically compiling mileage reimbursement reports.

In addition, the solution provides families with immediate access to information. Case workers can review case files remotely, so there's no need to carry the bulky files to visits. If they want to connect the family

with a resource, they can access the Internet or make a call to solve the problem on the spot. For example, when one parent requested tutoring for her child, Sanchez was able to find a program before she left the home. "We looked up the information on the Internet, called and signed her up," she said. "Under the old way, I would have had to go back to the office, research something and then get back to her. This just saves us a lot of time. And we found a great tutoring program."

No Down Time

According to Allegra, OK Connect has streamlined work processes and enhanced accountability. "The solutions that we've brought to the table with AT&T's help have created an incredible amount of accountability and increased productivity," she said.

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– Frances Allegra, Executive Director, Our Kids

Home visits have increased by 30 percent since the technology was deployed, and case workers are more easily able to fulfill a requirement to enter child welfare information into a live state database, "whether they're sitting in a doctor's office, a school or a courtroom," Allegra said. "So much of their time is spent waiting for appointments. And during those long periods of wait, they have access to their equipment."

Our Kids case workers now have no down time, she added. "We've heard directly from case workers that the solution has changed their job dramatically; now they don't have to go back to the office at 8 o'clock at night and try to get everything done for the next morning."

Because Sanchez always has her laptop and smartphone, she can work as easily as if she were in the office. "I can work from wherever I go; I'm saving a lot of hours, so I'm never behind." Sanchez and her colleagues can also stay on top of developing situations. "We're able to deal with issues as they come up," she stated, sometimes preventing a bad situation from escalating. "It takes away a lot of stress."

It also gives the agency "a breadcrumb trail" of each case worker's day. "If we have workers that we think are not doing their job properly, it's possible with GPS technology to go back and see how they've spent their day," Smith said. This tracking also adds a measure of safety for the case workers themselves.

Because technology is not traditionally a big part of the day-to-day activities of most child welfare workers, Our Kids recognized it had a huge change management issue. Smith believes the shadowing and focus groups contributed to case workers' willingness to adopt the technology. "They chose and piloted the equipment. They told us what worked and what didn't," she said. "I think it made a huge difference in their acceptance of it."

Fast and Reliable Network Support

Thanks to OK Connect, case workers are connected all day long. "My experience with the network has been great," Sanchez says. "I go to all parts of the city, and I've never had a problem logging into my laptop or using my phone. It's been very fast and very reliable."

IT Project Manager Fernandez maintains this reliability is crucial if workers are to comply with reporting statutes. "Up time is critical for them. If they can't access a network, they can literally be out of compliance with what the state requires case workers to do."

Child safety is a factor that Our Kids keeps at the forefront at all times. "If they cannot comply with their timeliness requirements and a child gets hurt, that's an unacceptable situation," he said. "Our level of comfort is very high with this solution because we have a very large national company with the infrastructure in place to provide us broadband access in the field."

Smith concurred that the "solid and stable" aspect of AT&T's solution was attractive, as was the price. "We really felt like we got the best of both worlds. We have this reliable infrastructure supporting us in a very price-competitive package."

Our Kids appreciated "the many benefits that AT&T brought to the table," she added. "They were there in the early days with us, brainstorming ideas and looking for solutions. We have a very small staff and we're a non-profit and AT&T was there."

AT&T trained Our Kids case workers to use the devices and software and offers ongoing enterprise technical support to the agency. Perhaps best of all from the IT Project Manager's point of view is the single point of contact. "Some organizations will promise you the world, but AT&T has been very responsive to our needs," Hernandez said.

Our Kids is ready to layer additional applications on its mobility solution and is currently experimenting with using laptop videocams to conduct judicial hearings. "Instead of taking the child out of school all day to be in court, we send the case worker to the child's school and use the AT&T mobile broadband network to connect to the courthouse," Smith said. The solution reduces the stigma for kids who have to be pulled from classes to go to court, and means they might only miss one class rather than a whole school day.

Knowing That Each Child is Safe

It's been less than a year since Our Kids introduced the mobility solution, but officials can't see how they ever operated without it. "Child safety is paramount to Our Kids and to the state," Allegra said. "That's why this project fits so well into everyone's priorities. I think the biggest measurable in this project is the fact that we know that each child has been seen every 30 days and is safe."

Although Rilya Wilson, the foster child who disappeared in 2001, is still missing today, solutions like OK Connect will make it less likely that another missing child will fall through the cracks in an overstressed child welfare system. States Allegra "There's no question that the mobility solutions that we've implemented have helped increase the safety of children."

For more information contact your AT&T Representative or visit us at www.att.com/stateandlocal.

Important Information

Actual results may vary depending on AT&T solution selected by customer. Coverage not available in all areas. Availability, security, speed, timeliness and uninterrupted use of service are not guaranteed. Additional hardware, software, services and/or network connection may be required and may be subject to additional third party terms and conditions. Additional restrictions apply. Offers subject to change.