



OJJDP National Juvenile Information Sharing Initiative

U P D A T E

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The Important-But-Risky Business of Information Sharing

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What Is Information Sharing?

“Information sharing” is usually associated with technology. It even sounds like a very technical term. The sharing of information is defined as the process of exchanging data (i.e., sharing information) among various agencies’ or organizations’ through computer systems and, that information can be located almost anywhere – even in a cloud.¹ There have been many initiatives aimed at standardizing information sharing. Some include the use of extensible markup language (XML²), simple object access protocol (SOAP³) and web services description language (WSDL⁴). We, as users of information, all share information. In fact, we’ve actually created a greater demand for it through the extended use of the Internet, email, blogs, wikis, instant messaging and other social media tools.

State and local jurisdictions across the United States are working to improve information sharing among key agencies that are responsible for community safety and the health and wellbeing of at-risk youth and juvenile offenders.

Why Care? Simple—Inadequate Information Can Lead to Inappropriate Youth Services

All too often, juvenile justice and the many other agencies that serve youth do not receive timely and reliable information that would help them effectively conduct assessments and determine appropriate supervision, treatment, sanctions, incentives and services for youth. Yet information sharing is essential to facilitate early intervention and preventive work for safeguarding children, juveniles and youth as well as for wider public protection. It’s instrumental to the goal of improving outcomes for all children.

In fact, sharing information about at-risk youth and children involved in multiple systems or agencies facilitates better outcomes for children, youth and families, and can have direct impacts on their safety, health and general well-being.

Case in Point: “Sarah”

When her mother was incarcerated, a 10-year-old girl—we’ll call her Sarah—had already been exposed to domestic violence and substance abuse in the home and she was placed into the foster care system. Now age 17, Sarah has been involved in the justice system, has a mental health profile, has been placed in over 14 different foster care homes and seven different schools, and has had more than 10 different case managers. Because education, medical and mental health records typically didn’t follow her through these many placements and case managers, providing important services has often been delayed or, worse, not provided at all. Once, she had two separate mental health plans and two individualized education programs (IEPs) because the agencies she was involved with didn’t share the original information. The teen was reassessed for services dozens of times—primarily because the original assessments were not shared between agencies or counties nor was there an indication that the assessments even existed.

If agencies had been able to share information about this youth:

- Foster parents, schools and state agencies would have understood the youth’s circumstances and needs, enabling them to respond faster with appropriate services;
- Records would have been accessible as needed and necessary by the agencies charged with the care of the youth;
- The expense of providing duplicate services and resources would have been eliminated;
- Reevaluations and multiple assessments would have been significantly reduced;
- Sarah would have received necessary services, increasing the odds of her success in treatment, school and, ultimately, in life.

According to a series of focus groups held with parents and youth involved in multiple systems in Colorado in 2010 and 2011, parents appreciate the benefits that information sharing provides their children and family. Through these groups we found that parents and youth alike expect information about them to be exchanged in order to assist in the services they receive. However, the information that is shared is also expected to be shared with responsibility, accuracy and confidentiality. OJJDP's National Juvenile Information Sharing Initiative (NJISI) is working with multiple sites through training and technical assistance so that this will be possible.

It's Also Important to Safeguard Information About Youth

Sharing information when it is not essential is not only wrong, it can harm a child or young person. For example, it can lead to detrimental prejudice against a child, bullying, social labeling, problems in schools and other difficult-to-treat situations. Maintaining privacy and confidentiality of this information is critical.

To achieve successful outcomes for youth, the multiple systems that have contact with children, juveniles and young people must know what to do, how to use and how to share information in the most effective and responsible manner. This is particularly relevant if a child and/or family require a service or if an agency believes a child is in need, including children at risk of suffering harm or those re-entering the community.

National Guidelines Facilitate Appropriate Information Sharing

In 2000, OJJDP determined that in order to increase the capacity of juvenile jurisdictions and youth serving agencies to plan and implement juvenile information sharing, national guidelines would be required. Representatives from five states got together and agreed to collaborate on initiatives that, ultimately, would allow government agencies to share information about youth and families across local and state agencies.

But doing this isn't as easy as signing an agreement. It requires:

- Developing policies and guidelines that standardize the approach for at risk youth and juvenile information sharing in an efficient, appropriate and timely manner;
- Creating protocols that ensure the safeguarding of sensitive information about a child, youth or family in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality while controlling distribution strictly on a need-to-know⁵ basis;
- Conducting testing and validation of promising practices;
- Implementation, ongoing monitoring and governance by all participating agencies, including the families.

A federal initiative—called the National Juvenile Information Sharing Initiative (NJISI)—sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and managed by the Center for Network Development (CND) is a training

and technical assistance project designed to build state and local jurisdictions' capacity to plan and successfully implement information sharing through standardized, proven practices and policies through guidelines developed specifically for at risk youth and juvenile justice agencies.

NJISI Benefits

Individuals representing a multitude of agencies and states continue to work through the often-complex issues that surround sharing information about children and youth. But progress continues to be made.

Here's a sampling how proper information sharing can assist agencies and the children, youth and families that are involved in multiple systems:

- Better, more informed decisions based on accurate and timely information provided to key decision makers;
- Implementation of prevention and intervention services and positive youth development service plans;
- Coordination between agencies yields timely services for youth and families and, savings to local and state agencies.

All of these areas—and many more—need information sharing in order to facilitate better outcomes for children, youth and families. In the future, you'll be hearing much more about NJISI and the progress that's being made to improve your access to information that will help you do your job more efficiently and effectively.

¹ **Cloud computing** refers to the logical computational resources (data, software) accessible via a computer network (through WAN or Internet etc.), rather than from a local computer. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_computing

² **Extensible Markup Language (XML)** is a set of rules for encoding documents in machine-readable form. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/XML>

³ **Simple Object Access Protocol**, is a protocol specification for exchanging structured information in the implementation of Web Services in computer networks. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SOAP>

⁴ **Web Services Description Language (WSDL)** is an XML-based language that is used for describing the functionality offered by a Web service. A WSDL description of a web service (also referred to as a *WSDL file*) provides a machine-readable description of how the service can be called, what parameters it expects and what data structures it returns. It thus serves a roughly similar purpose as a Method signature in a programming language. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_Services_Description_Language

⁵ **Definition of "Need to Know"**: A requirement for disclosure and receipt of private information. The information needs to be directly related to the legitimate stated purpose of the disclosure and the agency need for the information in order to perform its duties and responsibilities (OJJDP, Guidelines for Juvenile Information Sharing, p. 33).

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Go to the National Juvenile Information Sharing Initiative's website: <http://www.juvenileis.org> for frequent updates and information on promising JIS sites.