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# **Aspiranet Leverages Collaboration Platform to Deliver Better and More Accountable Services to California Children and Families**

“Our vision is to take collective action to support communities and families as they love and care for children.” – Vernon Brown, CEO Aspiranet

## Aspiranet Leverages SharePoint Capabilities to Deliver Better and More Accountable Services to California Children and Families

### Summary:

*When a child is abused or neglected—or when a child tries to stay out of trouble after school—access to services that respond to the immediacy of the need can be the difference between a positive or negative outcome. In California, extending services that provide care, support, guidance or educational opportunity is the daily challenge that veteran social worker Vernon Brown, CEO of Aspiranet focuses on every day. Founded in 1971 as a six-bed group home in Moss Beach, California -- Aspiranet today operates 35 core programs that deliver services to nearly 10,000 California children and families seeking services. Aspiranet operates with an annual budget of \$40 million and has more than 825 full- and part-time employees dispersed among 44 locations throughout the Central Valley, San Francisco Bay Area, Central Coast and Los Angeles Basin of California. Each location and program requires caring, compassionate and skillful caseworkers. However, to remain effective and extend the organization's impact on those who need it the most, each caseworker also requires the effective and integrated implementation of information technology.*

### Situation

When Brown joined Aspiranet in 1978, the organization's business processes relied only on paper forms. Aspiranet's first venture into technology began in 1982 when caseworkers started tracking information on an Apple IIc for 48 children. "Much has changed since those days," Brown recalls. "Today our case workers must meet higher standards of compliance and documentation on thousands of cases."

Until 2000, Aspiranet's casework and admin staffs relied heavily on fax machines to communicate critical information between one another across California. All information about children and their families was recorded on paper and manual filing was the norm. In parallel to its vast array of file cabinets and clerks, Aspiranet's five-person IT staff maintained several different databases on servers located at each of Aspiranet's offices scattered across the state. To maintain the IT infrastructure and synchronize data, the Aspiranet IT staff ran itself ragged servicing systems located in each of its three major operational regions, centered in Los Angeles Basin, the Central Valley, and the San Francisco Bay Area. "Our IT staff logged over 100,000 miles per year in those days," says Brown.

The old records systems were at their breaking point when Aspiranet dramatically expanded its foster care programs in late 1990s. The organization began making investments in IT, in part to cope with its dramatically rising case load. The infusion of new technology made only marginal improvements in Aspiranet's operations, which were then dispersed over 25 separate locations at the time. On average, one computer was shared by three Aspiranet employees. Further hampering the modernization effort was the absence of a strategic IT plan. A common, centralized email deployment was not included.

Cutover from the old paper and fax based system took nine months, and during that time, individual users and field offices haphazardly adapted their old processes to their new equipment. Instead of faxing or manually routing documents and reports of their caseworker activities, Aspiranet case workers and administrative staff shared forms and documents via common drives with no consistency.

By the early 2000s Aspiranet had grown to include new program areas and a burgeoning population of children and families receiving its services. “During this time, the practice of case management had undergone significant transformation, with greater expectations of compliance with specific standards for case worker activity and recordkeeping,” says Miles Dapsauski, Executive Director of AltruIT, an IT support organization that grew out of Aspiranet to become a resource for the broader non-profit community.

Despite IT’s promises of efficiency and accuracy, Aspiranet found itself with a tangle of records and procedures that were difficult to track and recall. On top of this complexity was a required layer of security, which was necessary to protect client confidentiality in accordance with a host of new privacy protection regulations.

“Our system had become unsustainable,” says Brown of Aspiranet’s 90s-era foray into IT transformation.

## **Solution**

With a grant from the Microsoft Corporation in 2003, the non-profit took its first bold step toward automating enterprise operations with the deployment of a Windows 2000 Server and Windows XP desktop computers.

The Microsoft grant, with licenses for several different Microsoft products was valued at over \$750,000. The savings from the Microsoft donation allowed Aspiranet to invest resources into a centralized datacenter and private Wide Area Network. The WAN addressed another critical shortfall in meeting new standards of care; protection of confidential individual data. During this period, Aspiranet also moved to an enterprise-wide email deployment, which greatly improved communications across program units.

“While these improvements in security and messaging were steps in the right direction, they did not address the core program processes essential to Aspiranet’s six major program areas: Family, Adoption, Foster Care, Education, After-School Care and Community,” explains Dapsauski.

That is when Aspiranet’s part-time Forms Administrator, Kevin Rinker, hit upon a low-cost solution that would harness SharePoint capabilities already embedded in Aspiranet’s installed Windows 2000 server infrastructure.

Rinker’s idea was to use SharePoint to rein in and standardize Aspiranet’s casework practices and workflow. Aspiranet also began to use SharePoint to collect and store the detailed documentation required by state and local government agencies as well as institutional donors.

The imaginative Rinker discovered that SharePoint could also be used to improve Aspiranet's relationships with its program participants and partners. Rinker looked outside of the non-profit world for examples of SharePoint integration into business processes, and found particular inspiration in the SharePoint installation used by Hawaiian Airlines. As a result, Aspiranet developed a SharePoint web portal for children and families who participate in its programs. The SharePoint platform also enabled Aspiranet to directly collaborate with its service delivery partners; other non-profits and government agencies.

## Benefits

Aspiranet's SharePoint installation has allowed the non-profit to extend its focus on services for California's children and families by building upon SharePoint as a tool that supports its business practices. Case workers in the field have been liberated from time consuming faxing and filing, with the result that service quality is measurably improved and more uniform.

Initially, Aspiranet's social workers were hesitant to start relying on the new SharePoint-based system. Getting buy-in from the non-profit's frontline was tough, Brown recalls. "At the time, case workers were not the most tech savvy bunch," he says, "but a real-world incident early on changed a lot of minds about the new system."

When a foster child under Aspiranet's care suddenly fell gravely ill and was air lifted to the nearest children's hospital, emergency medical personnel and foster parents didn't have the child's medical records readily available. An Aspiranet social worker was able to instantly access child's medical records via the new system. The worker was able to share critical information with the team, which saved the child's life.

Other Aspiranet programs have been streamlined by SharePoint. "For example, the time span of a typical adoption case has been dramatically shortened, which is better for both the adopted child and for the adopting parents," says Dapsauski.

Moreover, managers at Aspiranet report that the SharePoint installation can be credited with improving the non-profit's compliance and accountability. New statutory and regulatory requirements can now be promulgated quickly and uniformly throughout Aspiranet's network of practitioners and supervisors. Records are now authoritative and immediately available to Aspiranet's managers and California state officials.

The SharePoint installation is scalable, which ensures that all of Aspiranet's programs can be managed and reviewed in fine detail regardless of size or scope. For example, Aspiranet uses SharePoint to administer after school programs involving thousands of children daily by using a barcode-based ID system to validate participation. SharePoint infrastructure also serves Aspiranet's adoption programs, which require intensive documentation and client interaction over long periods of time, often spanning years. Previously, programs of such disparate scale simply were not subjected to similarly thorough scrutiny by management, funders, or overseeing government agencies. Brown is especially satisfied with the administrative savings that Aspiranet has been able to realize since adopting the SharePoint solution. "Case work is hard," says Brown, "so we have to be able to address staff turnover." But turnover-related costs have

been minimized since Aspiranet built SharePoint-based training and new employee orientation online training capabilities. Automation has also reduced Aspiranet's human resources management costs.

“The implementation of an online claim system has reduced Aspiranet's worker's compensation costs,” says Dapsauski. Indeed, Brown believes his five-person HR and Payroll Department, overseeing the needs of over 825 employees, sets a new standard for non-profit overhead efficiency.

Management and funding have also reached a new level of efficiency and granular control. Because Aspiranet relies on a variety of different public and private sources for its funding, reporting requirements vary wildly. A recently implemented time and attendance accounting system even allows real-time monitoring of individual program performance, and an overall reduction in accounting and auditing costs.

Aspiranet is already looking to the future for new opportunities to incorporate technology into its vision of taking collective action to support communities and families as they love and care for children. A pilot project in conjunction with Motorola to provide Aspiranet case workers with mobile tools to help older foster youth make the transition to adulthood is set to begin in February. Frontline social workers have played a leading role in designing the hardware and software for this innovative new program for this at-risk group, who often find those first years out of the foster care system especially difficult.