



5 HURDLES BLOCKING SOCIAL WORKER PRODUCTIVITY IN CHILD WELFARE

How Next-Generation Technology Designed for Engagement, Efficiency, and Service Delivery Can Help Knock Them Down



INTRODUCTION

Child welfare social workers have the power to change lives, but that's easier said than done when you consider how many obstacles stand in their way.

Cases are increasing in complexity, information is coming in too quickly, systems and processes are inefficient, and turnover is always looming. Plus, mandates and priorities constantly change, increasing the effort required by agencies.

Social workers are more time-strapped than ever, making it difficult to focus on reducing trauma, increasing safety, and making a positive impact on children and families.

The dilemma is figuring out how to help social workers be productive and drive meaningful outcomes in environments that don't naturally lend themselves to it.



“

We get young professionals that want an opportunity to change the world, even for one child. There is no reason that our system should be changing their mindset that they're going to have an impact.

”

— **JOE KELLERBY**, *Child Welfare Director*,
Mesa County Department of Human Services

“

It makes a stressful job even that much more stressful. There's always that sense of never being caught up and never being prepared for what's next. And in this business, there's always something coming next. It's just a cycle that burns people out.

”

— **BETHANY MOEN**, *Social Services Supervisor*,
Houston County Department of Human Services



INTRODUCTION

Northwoods has been committed to helping child welfare agencies for over 10 years. We know that some ongoing and systemic factors, like the nature of work and its emotional toll, can't be controlled.

However, we're also deeply familiar with how agencies' processes for collecting, accessing, and sharing information can worsen the problem, drastically impacting social worker productivity and negatively altering outcomes for children and families.

We created this eBook to address five common productivity hurdles that child welfare workers face every day. We'll also share how child welfare directors can help their workers overcome these problems by equipping them with a solution designed for engagement, efficiency, and service delivery.



Click the icons below to jump to specific sections:



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK



ACCESSING AND APPLYING INFORMATION



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES



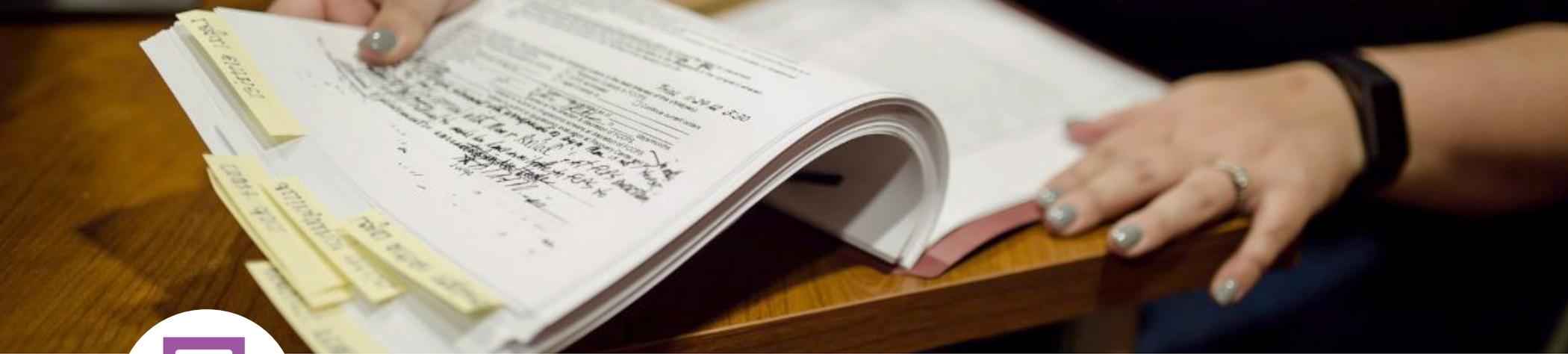
TURNOVER AND RETENTION



DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY



**CONCLUSION: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER
WITH A SYSTEM OF ENGAGEMENT**



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

THE CHALLENGE

Social workers hoping to engage families are forced to spend most of their time on agency- and state-required paperwork. After all, if it's not documented, it didn't happen! Even with SACWIS/CCWIS and electronic case management systems in place, administrative tasks (for example, documenting phone calls or entering case notes) are still cumbersome. Inefficient processes are frustrating too, like repeatedly filling out the same information on multiple forms.

THE IMPACT

Overwhelming and redundant administrative work hurts social workers' efficiency, limits quality time spent with children, and adds stress, forcing workers to worry if they're doing enough to make an impact. Morale declines across the agency and cases can take longer to manage, which further inconveniences families and keeps them in the system.



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

“

We only have more and more and more paperwork. It's always documentation, documentation, documentation. That's just our world. I don't know when we have time to do all this documentation and then to actually have face-to-face time with families.

”

— **MONICA WILLIAMS**, *Children's Services Program Manager*,
Lenoir County Department of Social Services

“

No one came into child welfare to sit at a desk and move papers around. I want our employees out with our families and spending less time on paperwork.

”

— **JENNIFER STIMSON**, *Commissioner of Human Services*,
Chemung County Department of Social Services



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK



EVERY 45 MINUTES SPENT

with a family requires between two to five hours of paperwork.



IT TAKES UP TO 24 HOURS

of work to complete a child study, but the right tools could cut that in half.

SOURCES:

1. State of the Child—A special report by Auditor Eugene DePasquale (Pennsylvania; 2017)
2. Interview with a child welfare social worker in Minnesota



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK



THE VISION

Automate paperwork and manual, time-consuming administrative processes so that social workers can spend more time doing the work they love and less time documenting what they did. Social workers become more efficient and effective, which helps them improve case continuity and deliver services to children and families faster.



THE SOLUTION

Social workers repurpose up to two hours per day previously spent on administrative tasks to maximize time interacting with families. They can also complete forms more efficiently: for example, basic information such as the client's name and address can be automatically pushed into a form for a service or referral, saving social workers time they used to spend manually filling it out.



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

“

We're able to take action a lot faster in regard to what our next steps are going to be when meeting with the families, making referrals, getting services in place when needed.

”

— **ANDREA ONSTAD**, *Child Protection Social Worker*,
Houston County Department of Human Services

“

Staff that were significantly behind on case notes are now saying 'all of my case notes are current. I don't have to spend three hours typing notes anymore.'

”

— **JENNIFER STIMSON**, *Commissioner of Human Services*,
Chemung County Department of Social Services



ACCESSING AND APPLYING INFORMATION

THE CHALLENGE

Social workers too often find themselves without the information they need—especially while interacting with families. Further, the sheer volume of information coming in too quickly and from multiple sources is daunting and difficult for social workers to manage. Critical details are often buried deep within a case file and virtually impossible to uncover.

THE IMPACT

The lack of access to case information makes it difficult for social workers to make and conclusively support a decision, which puts them at risk of making the wrong call. Recollecting information forces families to relive trauma they've experienced in the past, while the child's safety and well-being hangs in the balance. All of this can delay a child or family from quickly getting the services they need.



ACCESSING AND APPLYING INFORMATION

“

With the trauma some of our families have experienced, they don't want to relive that every single second of every single day. When we go into a place and they are saying something, it shouldn't be a surprise to me.

”

— **ELIZABETH MERRINGER**, *Ongoing Caseworker*,
Fairfield County Child and Adult Protective Services

“

We scratched stuff on legal pads, and when we couldn't find our legal pad, or we'd lose the paper, we'd have to go back from memory and try to remember what we discussed with the family. We had laptops and some workers were using those, but it was more work than it was making things easier.

”

— **JACOB MEEZE**, *Investigation and Assessment Social Worker*,
Beaufort County Department of Social Services



ACCESSING AND APPLYING INFORMATION

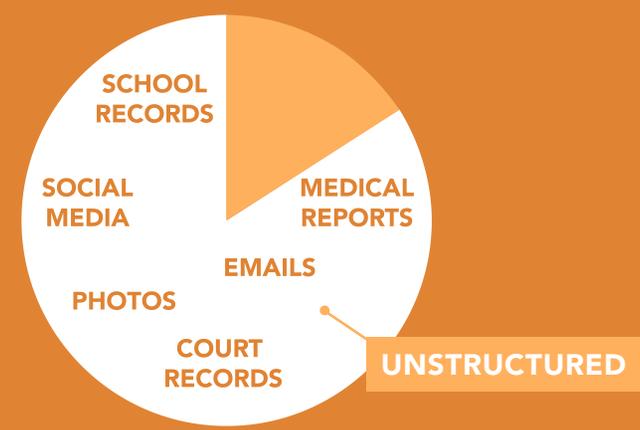


It can take a child welfare worker upwards of **12 HOURS** to review the history of *just one* case.



CASE IN POINT...

In North Carolina, protective factors and well-being needs are only identified for **55% OF CHILDREN** during Child and Family Team meetings and when developing Family Services Agreements, largely because of limited information gathered during assessments.



80% OF CASE INFORMATION

lives in an unstructured format, making it difficult to access.

SOURCES:

1. Interviews with child welfare agency directors
2. Interview with a child welfare social worker in North Carolina
3. "North Carolina Child Welfare Preliminary Reform Plan" (2018)



ACCESSING AND APPLYING INFORMATION



THE VISION

Provide workers with a more complete picture of a child or family's past and present to safeguard their future. Additionally, help social workers find the right information at the right time to make more informed, confident decisions. Mobilize case and client information to maximize social worker productivity and safety.



THE SOLUTION

Social workers can easily view critical information and quickly familiarize themselves with all the details of a case, including those that were previously hidden or buried. They can understand and prioritize a family's risk factors and focus on their greatest needs. Case and client files are accurate and accessible to all social workers, supervisors, and managers, regardless of their location.



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

“

Being able to surface themes, and connections, and that kind of thing for kids and families, I thought, this would be perfect for all the work we're doing trying to locate permanent connections for kids, all the work we're doing trying to locate placement for kids who we might not otherwise know about, and then all the work we do putting together kids' histories for them when they're adopted.

”

— **THERESA HOUCK**, *Child Advocacy Center Supervisor,*
Chemung County Department of Social Services

“

We are able to access information that we need right away, and right away is really important when we're talking about child safety.

”

— **KARI DAGGETT**, *Former Child Welfare Director,*
Mesa County Department of Human Services



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES

THE CHALLENGE

Caseloads are constantly increasing in number and complexity, but the number of social workers and resources available is not keeping pace. On top of this, new policies and mandates are demanding more of workers' time, forcing them to spend their already limited resources focusing on compliance instead of worrying about children and families.

THE IMPACT

Child welfare social workers are stretched beyond their limits. Children and families who are in desperate need of time and attention may not receive it, which creates even greater risk. This also places a heavy burden on the social workers and agencies who are responsible for keeping these children and families safe.



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES

“

You don't get to talk to them about resources, to set them up with things that can help them be successful in the future, to make sure there are no marks or bruises on the kid and the family is doing okay and they have food in the house.

”

— **KRISTIN MASKA**, *Assessments Case Manager*,
Mesa County Department of Human Services

“

Ultimately I'd like to be out talking to kids in the schools, doing forensic interviews, doing follow-up home visits to ensure that things are going okay rather than spending time on paperwork and making sure everything is documented.

”

— **MORGAN HARVEY**, *Senior Caseworker*,
Chemung County Department of Social Services



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES



+40 HOURS

In Wisconsin, new mandates have increased the time workers spend on every case by 40 hours, hurting their ability to engage with children and families



How social workers spend their time:
30% TIME WITH FAMILIES,
70% TIME ON PAPERWORK

SOURCES:

1. "County Perspectives & Recommendations to Address Wisconsin's Child Welfare Crisis," a presentation for the Wisconsin Counties Association Annual Conference (2018)
2. Interviews with social workers in Colorado, Minnesota, and New York



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES



THE VISION

Enable social workers to spend as much time as possible out of the office engaging with families, visiting children in their homes or in care, attending court hearings, and more. Give them more time to promoting family well-being, building trust, and finding resources, which ultimately helps increase child safety and permanency.



THE SOLUTION

Give workers the right tools to make the most of their time with children and families. Allow workers to efficiently collect and make use of content anytime, anywhere, without disrupting their interactions or causing discomfort for the family. Case information collected in the field is automatically synced back to the office, further increasing efficiency and freeing up even more time.



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES

“

I'm able to give them more attention, more of my time. We can involve the families and they can complete their own case plan and their own referrals. It gives them that sense of responsibility and ownership in their case planning and case process.

”

— **KAHALIA LIVINGSTON**, *Social Worker IAT, In Home Services,*
Lenoir County Department of Social Services

“

If workers were able to spend more time out in the field with families, the hope is that it would reduce recurrence, children would be safer faster, risk would be reduced, and there wouldn't be future child abuse or maltreatment.

”

— **JENNIFER YANNETTE**, *CPS Administrator,*
Chemung County Department of Social Services



TURNOVER AND RETENTION

THE CHALLENGE

Paperwork, inefficient processes, emotional stress, secondary trauma, and other factors cause workers to burn out and leave, which leads to significant information gaps for the newly assigned worker. This new worker now has the daunting task of trying to pick up the case where the previous worker left off, but often has to re-collect information that already exists and repeat steps that have already been taken.

THE IMPACT

Turnover makes it difficult for a child welfare agency to achieve its mission. It hinders case continuity for children, causes problems with placement stability, and increases the potential for further trauma. It's also incredibly costly to agencies and affects the caseloads of workers and supervisors who stay, which leads to an unfortunate cycle of burnout and poorer case outcomes.



TURNOVER AND RETENTION

“

Our workloads are very high and very demanding and very complex. When folks get into this work and they realize, ‘Wow, I’m doing a lot more paperwork and I’m sitting at a computer all day instead of interacting with families,’ it kind of changes their mind about whether they want to do this work or not.

”

— **KARI DAGGETT**, *Former Director of Child Welfare,*
Mesa County Department of Human Services

“

We’re dealing with folks who are going through crisis and trauma. They are experiencing some of life’s hardest things, and trust isn’t something that’s given freely. If the people they’re required to interact with are changing over all the time, it makes the work that much more difficult and less effective.

”

— **JOHN PUGLEASA**, *Director,*
Houston County Department of Human Services



TURNOVER AND RETENTION



Average
Caseloads



x4 Oregon
Caseloads

Reported caseloads in Oregon are three to four times higher than what's optimal, contributing to turnover and difficulty recruiting new workers. The state would need to hire, train, and retain **769 MORE CHILD WELFARE STAFF** positions to fill the gap.



Turnover is incredibly costly to agencies: Training alone costs **AN AVERAGE \$54,000** for each new social worker.

SOURCES:

1. "Foster Care in Oregon: Chronic management failures and high caseloads jeopardize the safety of some of the state's most vulnerable children," an audit report by the State of Oregon (2018)
2. "Why the Workforce Matters," by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (2016)



TURNOVER AND RETENTION



THE VISION

Reduce burnout, anxiety, stress, and other pressures that contribute to turnover for overworked social workers. Give them the right tools to have more time to make a difference, help children, and do the work they want to do. Make workers feel supported by agency leadership to improve morale, which will help break the burnout cycle and reduce the likelihood of future turnover.



THE SOLUTION

Implement technology that lessens the burden placed on social workers by ineffective tools and processes. Give social workers the ability to utilize the meaningful content and information they need to succeed, both in the field and in the office, so they have more time to focus on what truly matters: children and families.



TURNOVER AND RETENTION

“

Having systems that help us do our jobs, help us manage our time, help us to be more effective in the work that we're doing helps with burnout and turnover. We feel more confident in what we're doing. We feel like we're being supported.

”

— **KAHALIA LIVINGSTON**,
Social Worker IAT, In Home Services,
Lenoir County Department of Social Services

“

As staff are coming on board and seeing that we embrace technology, it's encouraging them to stay here because it balances the paperwork demands and the family demands better.

”

— **KELLIE LOWMAN**,
Director of Family and Children Services
Chemung County Department of Social Services



DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY

THE CHALLENGE

Many agencies are still working with data collection processes and systems designed to meet important state and federal reporting requirements. But, the way they collect data often doesn't sync up with their daily activities, which causes duplicative work. This makes it nearly impossible for workers to provide quality and timely data, even though it's a critical component of compliance.

THE IMPACT

Social workers spend too much time collecting, entering, or verifying data, and not enough time using it to inform decisions and actions. These inefficient processes for managing data decelerate social workers' ability to produce more efficient and effective child- and family-centered outcomes. Further, families are frustrated when they have to provide the same basic information multiple times.



DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY

“

Our staff put tons and tons of data into systems that the state primarily operates. That data is used for their purposes for compliance. That’s good, we should be compliant with state and federal regulations, but that data is really hard for us to mine in any meaningful way to be able to make management decisions or case-specific decisions.

”

— **JOHN PUGLEASA**, *Director*,
Houston County Department of Human Services

“

SACWIS was never set up to be a tool that you would use in your home visits or that you would ever enter your case notes right there in the home visit. The technology is just not there to do that safely, securely, or easily.

”

— **LISA HANKES**, *CPS Ongoing Supervisor*,
Dane County Department of Human Services



DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY

Three of the top four greatest obstacles for government officials analyzing data for decision-making:



DATA ACCESSIBILITY



DATA QUALITY



DATA SHARING



43%: NEARLY HALF

of HHS decision-makers say a lack of data sharing and access are the primary inhibitors to improved service delivery.



LEADERS IN OVER 80% OF STATES

have said they mistrust the integrity of at least some of the data they come across.

SOURCE:

1. "How States Use Data to Inform Decisions," a report from The Pew Charitable Trusts (2018)

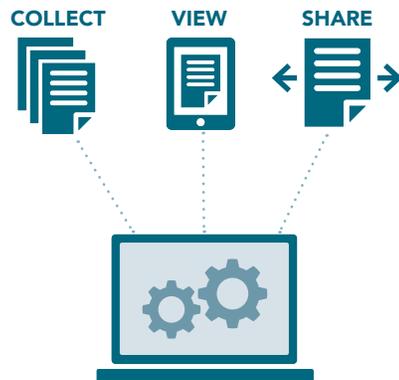


DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY



THE VISION

Remove obstacles from data collection and sharing processes so workers can quickly provide information in a manner that's natural to their daily processes and seamlessly meets all state and federal requirements. Simultaneously increase data quality, which ultimately improves case continuity and enhances the delivery of services and care to at-risk children and families.



THE SOLUTION

Allow social workers to collect and use data anytime, anywhere. Eliminate manual and duplicative data entry by facilitating a bi-directional data exchange between systems. Reduce human errors that happen when social workers reenter data multiple times. Allow social workers to share data with anyone who needs it, from co-workers and supervisors to service providers and state systems.



DATA COLLECTION AND QUALITY

“

Child welfare is hard work. We needed to modernize the way that our caseworkers meet federal and state requirements and still do the absolute best one-on-one work with clients. We want to give our caseworkers more time to spend with children and families.

”

— **CHRISTINE SCHUYLER**,
Commissioner of Social Services/Public Health Director,
Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services

“

We want caseworkers to touch information one time, get it into a system one time that can talk to others, and seamlessly be able to pull that data when and where we need, whether that's at the office or in the field to do it with a mobile platform.

”

— **JOE KELLERBY**, *Child Welfare Director,*
Mesa County Department of Human Services



BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

So, what can child welfare directors do to help their workers overcome these hurdles?

In today's world where there seems to be an app or an answer for everything, we've heard from several directors that face "analysis paralysis" and technology exhaustion when evaluating options.

Our advice: start with a solution that will address the biggest part of the problem, impact the largest group of workers, and serve the greatest percentage of the community. Additionally, look for solutions that are rooted in solving specific problems instead of just checking boxes on a list of requirements.



VIEW THE BLOG:

Building Better, More Impactful Solutions for Human Services



“

As directors, it is our sole responsibility to clear the path and move obstacles out of the way for people to stay in our agency and be fulfilled and grow as professionals and people. When they feel like they've got an opportunity to do that, they stay.

”

— **JOE KELLERBY**, *Child Welfare Director,*
Mesa County Department of Human Services

“

Programs like this should be important to all counties. They have to get on the boat. They have to get technology-enabled. And they have to buy the best technology they can. Not one that was popular a couple years ago, but the most advanced technology that's going to do the most good in the future.

”

— **AL KLEMM**, *Former Vice Chairman,*
Beaufort County Board of Commissioners



SYSTEM OF ENGAGEMENT

Looking specifically at productivity and overcoming the hurdles discussed in this eBook, a system of engagement—a solution designed to increase efficiency and improve service delivery—is the answer.

A system of engagement features a flexible, lightweight, intuitive, and user-centric interface that enables interaction, collaboration, and mobility. It is designed to work the way social workers do and fits the flow of their daily activities.

A purpose-built system of engagement eliminates redundant work, allowing workers to repurpose time previously spent on administrative tasks to do more high-value work with children and families.



WATCH THE WEBINAR TO LEARN MORE:

Impacting Child Welfare Outcomes with a System of Engagement



OVERCOMING PRODUCTIVITY HURDLES

To summarize how a system of engagement helps with the specific hurdles covered in this eBook:



TIME SPENT ON ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

Help workers repurpose up to two hours per day previously spent on administrative tasks to maximize time interacting with families.



ACCESSING AND APPLYING INFORMATION

Allow workers to easily view critical information and quickly familiarize themselves with all the details of a case, including those that were previously hidden or buried.



LIMITED TIME WITH FAMILIES

Enable workers to spend as much time as possible in the field focusing on boosting family engagement, building trust, and finding resources.



TURNOVER AND RETENTION

Give social workers the right tools and more time to make a difference, help children, and do the work they want.



DATA AND CONTENT COLLECTION

Allow social workers to collect data anytime, anywhere, plus improve quality by eliminating manual and duplicative data entry.



HIGH-VALUE WORK WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

By clearing hurdles that stand in the way, social workers have more time to focus on meaningful interactions and activities, including:



Engage collateral contacts



Focus time on complex or intense cases



Increase value of home and school visits



Better review history when a new case is assigned



Spend time preparing for court



Consistently hold productive child and family team meetings



IMACTFUL AGENCY OUTCOMES

More productive and informed social workers can also help impact outcomes across the agency, such as:



Make more informed, confident decisions



Keep every child as close to family as possible



Significantly improve timely permanency



Ensure every child maintains a connection to a stable, caring adult



Identify the root cause(s) contributing to risk factors in each case



Provide unique insight into the specialized needs of every child



Help prevent future abuse and neglect



Empower social workers to deliver the best possible services



LEARN HOW WE HELP CHILD WELFARE

Northwoods has spent thousands of hours with child welfare social workers and supervisors to understand their challenges and develop content management, mobile, and case discovery solutions to increase their productivity in the office and in the field.

Visit teamnorthwoods.com/child-welfare to learn how our systems of engagement can help your agency increase efficiency, service quality, worker satisfaction, and client well-being.



ABOUT NORTHWOODS

Northwoods is a technology company truly focused on human services. Your mission is our mission. We help you save lives and strengthen families. Here's how: over 45,000 social workers and caseworkers across the country use our solutions to manage, collect, view, and share content and data more efficiently, which saves them two hours a day. Workers repurpose that time to do more high-value work with clients. Agencies make the most of dollars and time and have the information they need to make decisions and meet reporting requirements.



teamnorthwoods.com