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ABSTRACT

This document explains how agencies serving recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can use videoconferencing as a tool for welfare and work force reform. The document begins with a brief overview of how videoconferencing and other communications technologies can be used in designing and delivering welfare and work force reform efforts. The following are among the program and policy issues discussed in Section 2: (1) available types of technology-based conferencing and communication techniques; (2) the available infrastructure for technology-based conferencing and communications and opportunities for expanding the infrastructure and making it more readily available; (3) ways technology-based conferencing and communications can help meet existing training, communications, and service delivery needs and priorities; (4) production and facilitation capacities needed to ensure that technology-based conferencing and communications tools are effective; and (5) issues in purchasing packaged training materials and other resources to enhance the effectiveness of technology-based communication. Section 3 reviews the findings of research on the use of electronic-based communication technologies in distance learning and other environments. Section 4 presents eight examples of innovative applications of electronic-based conferencing and communication in promoting welfare and work force reform. The bibliography lists the six resource Web sites and three publications. (MN)

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VIDEOCONFERENCING AS A TOOL FOR WELFARE AND WORKFORCE REFORM

by April Kaplan and Barry Van Lare

Background

Devolution brings new roles and responsibilities at all levels of government. It imposes new responsibilities on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and affords state and local agencies broad flexibility in designing and delivering welfare and workforce services. It offers considerable opportunities for community-based organizations and for nonprofit and for-profit service providers. Consistent policy and service information, better training, improved communication, and new ways of educating and serving low-income families are critical.

As the number of organizations and individuals involved in policymaking, program design, and program implementation increases, so does the need to communicate policies and procedures clearly and effectively. As recipients enter the workforce, they need up-to-date information on child care, transportation, and job training As well as ways to update eligibility information.

Training is critical to making systems changes and ensuring quality services. The large number of individuals and organizations involved in training often makes it difficult to address training needs in the usual classroom or on-the-job setting. Disabilities or family responsibilities may make it difficult for new employees to travel to training sites. In addition, travel costs and extended periods away from the office may pose special barriers for community-based organizations and nonprofit service providers.

Although printed materials have communicated policies, procedures, and information to policymakers and low-income families well in the past, new technology can relay these materials more effectively and efficiently. Satellite broadcasting, videoconferencing, personal computers, and the Internet offer new opportunities to provide high-quality training and alternative service delivery approaches at a reasonable cost.

There are multiple uses of communications technology and a growing number of users who can benefit from such technology. Consequently, the Welfare Information Network (WIN) is devoting this *Issue Note* to a discussion of the potential uses of technology-based communications and computer-based training as vehicles for serving communities, agencies, service providers, recipients, and employers and educating them on the impacts and opportunities encompassed in welfare and workforce reform.

Policy Issues

What are the various types of technology-based conferencing and communication techniques?
There are multiple uses of technology for conferencing and training. For purposes of this note, the term "technology-based conferencing" incorporates multiple conferencing technologies, including satellite broadcasting, videoconferences, audioconferences, desktop conferencing, CD-ROMs, and videotapes.

For the most part, technology conferencing is done through video or audio mechanisms and is used for meetings and training.

Audioconferencing often involves several individuals calling into one phone line so that a meeting can occur. In some cases, all speakers are given the chance to speak. In other cases, any individual may be on the call, but there are restrictions on who can speak. For example, audioconferences sponsored by the Center for Law and Social Policy have panels of experts make presentations on selected welfare related issues. Conference calls and audioconferences can play a key role in minimizing travel and maximizing information sharing. Small, two- to four-person conference calls can often be handled using regular office telephones. Calls with a larger number of participants usually require a "bridge" or the use of commercial conference-call services that are provided by most telecommunications companies.

There are a wide variety of videoconferencing technologies. The type of technology used for conferencing varies depending on the number of people involved, the environment of the participants, the degree of interactivity sought, and the nature of the information being exchanged. Technology-based conferencing can be done one to one, broadcasting from one site to multiple sites, or by connecting a number of sites so they can interact with one another.

Advancements in technology have provided a broad range of mechanisms to carry out conferencing and training. These mechanisms include using video and picture-phone conference calls, communicating from one desktop computer to another desktop, using computers as transmitters to capture and transmit video and audio on monitors and televisions screens, and using satellite downlinks for larger presentations.

Videoconferencing can take place at individual workstations, using desktop personal computers (PCs) and video data. PC-based conferencing can also support group conference systems that will capture and transmit video and audio from meeting or conference room settings. Group conferencing often uses more complex camera equipment and larger monitors. Connections can be obtained through Internet providers or leased telephone lines. Personal computers can also be useful for training individuals through the use of CD-ROMs. Using PCs for training can often be more cost-effective than using videoconferencing for training.

Another low-cost technology for communicating with individual users or small groups of users is the use of picture phones. This technology enables a visual context to be integrated with what individuals hear on the phone.

In addition to serving as a conduit for videoconferencing, the Internet can be used to develop learning sites. A curriculum can be offered via the Internet, enabling the information to be accessed at the convenience of the user and minimizing travel time and other costs associated with attending classes.

Satellite broadcasting, with or without interactive audio, is probably the most common way of communicating with a large number of remote sites. Satellite broadcasting requires access to uplink and downlink facilities to send and receive programming. Although the availability of more sophisticated technology is growing rapidly, constraints such as Internet access, available bandwidth, and access to satellite downlinks may make it impossible for some users to take advantage of some of the current technologies. As a result, experts suggest that using multiple approaches offers the most promise to reach larger audiences.

What is the available infrastructure for technology-based conferencing and communications and what are the opportunities for expanding that infrastructure and making it more readily available? As discussed above, different tools can be used for technology-based conferencing. In deciding what tools to use, an early step should be to inventory the technology-based communication resources that are available in the communities to be served. In most cases, the basic communications infrastructure is provided by private companies through telephone, cable, and satellite links. Users typically secure access to this infrastructure by purchasing time. In some states, the state has invested in a fiber-optic network that is available to public agencies for technology-based conferencing. In other states, the state has entered into a partnership with private providers to develop the backbone system. In addition to the communications infrastructure, users of technology-based conferencing need equipment to generate and receive communications. For audioconferencing, this may be as simple as a telephone set. For videoconferencing, more complex and expensive equipment is required. Satellite videoconferencing requires uplink and downlink capacity. Internet-based videoconferencing requires access to computers systems that have video cameras and cards. For individual users, the necessary technology is increasingly available as an option on personal computers.

The cost of leased time and equipment can be quite large. As a result, users often seek to partner with others to make the maximum use of current investments. In many cases, this involves the use of equipment at separate facilities such as libraries and colleges. Other partners could include businesses that use high-end equipment on a regular basis; public broadcasting systems; and nonprofit organizations, such as the churches affiliated with the Howard University School of Divinity, that have begun to invest in communications technology. In addition, many government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels have invested in technology and may be willing to make time and services available at a reasonable cost.

As organizations and agencies become more reliant on the use of technology-based communication, they will want to continue to look for potential partners to help finance needed capital investment and broaden points of access to videoconferencing. Human service and workforce agencies should consider playing an active role in such cooperative efforts and seek to spearhead such efforts.

What are the training, communications, and service delivery needs and priorities and how can technology-based conferencing and communications help meet those needs? Welfare and workforce systems are undergoing rapid change. These changes are reflected in new policies and new program designs and operating procedures. Policymakers and managers need up-to-date information on those changes as well as access to financial and performance data. Service providers and agency and organization staff also need access to timely training, particularly as states and localities seek to change programs and services to respond to emerging concerns such as job retention and advancement and the need to tailor programs to hard-to-serve recipients. Moreover, communication and training are critical to effect culture change both within organizations and as it relates to the expectations of customers and service recipients. Service contractors and communities need access to training and specialized support services. As more and more recipients are working, they need more timely ways to communicate their needs and changes in circumstances and to access information on jobs.

Off-site training is often difficult for workers and costly for employers. On-site training can be less expensive. In addition, training on site makes it possible to combine classroom training with on-the-job training so new employees can contribute to the work of the organization more quickly.

Each of these needs can be addressed, at least in part, through the use of technology-based communications and conferencing. In many cases, the same technology can be used to address multiple needs. In other cases, the solutions may require different approaches. For example, solutions aimed at providing services to individual clients will require more widely dispersed access points than will training for staff. The solutions may also require sites that are accessible after normal business hours. Agencies may want to concentrate first on the needs with related requirements.

Which technology-based conferencing and communications tools are likely to be most cost-effective in meeting identified needs? In many cases, the selection of conferencing and communications tools is likely to be driven by the nature of the audience to be reached. Although government agencies may be able to justify an investment in more costly production facilities and uplink and downlink capacity because of the large number of individuals served and the intensity of use, nonprofit and community-based agencies may not see sufficient use to justify such an expenditure. As noted above, bandwidth is an important part of the costs of technology-based conferencing and communication. Lower-speed connections to the Internet and the use of telephone-based videoconferencing can significantly reduce the costs for the smaller, less-frequent user. In assessing costs and benefits, it is important to consider the costs of travel and the staff time involved in travel. It also is important to consider the costs of expert trainers and the benefits of rapid rollout of training programs. In many cases, it may be possible to initiate programs and services using existing or borrowed technology and to make future investment decisions based on utilization and effectiveness.

What production and facilitation capacities are needed to ensure that technology-based conferencing and communication are effective? The type of production and facilitation capacities required will vary based on the nature of the event and the type of conferencing used. The impact of satellite broadcasting is generally related to the quality of the production. Most experts agree that satellite broadcasting and other videoconferencing mechanisms require a variety of presentation techniques that go beyond presentations by panels of speakers. Increasingly, organizations are using more sophisticated video tools such as animation. Many organizations contract with commercial production companies for studios but also depend on them to help develop desirable presentations. Other organizations use public television facilities or have invested in their own filming studios and hired staff to manage the production process. A similar investment in production quality can enhance the impact of Internet training resources and CD-ROMs and other video programming.

Although formal production and facilitation capacity may be less important to smaller meetings or conferencing situations, the quality of audio and video connections is critical. In addition, the equipment will have a significant impact on the success of the event. Sensitive microphones, sound-tracking cameras, and equipment that enables a moderator to identify and screen input from remote locations can all contribute to a more effective event. Regardless of the type of technology-based conferencing used, it is recommended that participants receive handouts prior to any session to help them understand the information presenters are presenting.

Communication techniques such as CD-ROMs and videos should be accompanied by written instructions on how to use the equipment and information on what other equipment may be required to use the CD-ROMs or videos. In addition, because usually there is no facilitator or instructor on hand when using a CD-ROM or video, having a phone number or e-mail address where users can contact a technical staff member for help.

The proper placement of people and monitors and screens is important. Other very basic components of a technology conference include having the proper lighting, providing handouts to participants, making sure there is no background noise, and having a room that is conducive to the audience or individual(s) participating in the conference. A facilitator can play a key role in ensuring the event runs smoothly. Some of the key jobs of the facilitator are keeping the room quiet, ensuring that one person speaks at a time, knowing what to do if the equipment is faulty, providing handouts to the participants, and keeping the audience engaged and alert by generating conversation during slower points or urging refreshment breaks.

What are some issues to address when purchasing packaged training materials or other resources that will enhance the effectiveness of technology-based communication? With the expansion in the use of video technology for training and providing services, new vendors and vendor software packages are constantly emerging. Information from vendors can often be overwhelming and extensive. Before determining a vendor or materials, agencies may want to consider embarking on an initial learning process. The Internet is a good place to learn about packages and what services various packages can provide. There are multiple electronic discussion lists that include users of videoconferencing technology. These lists can answer questions about vendors and services that could meet agency needs. Learning from the experiences of colleagues can also be very valuable. Prior to determining packages for carrying out technology-based conferencing, organizations should look at their existing internal technology and assess how that technology could be used with new standards and emerging technologies. Often it is not necessary to build an entirely new infrastructure. In addition, the experiences of colleagues can assist in making decisions on who can provide the services the agency needs and what kinds of videoconferencing techniques are best for the agency and its constituents.

Research Findings

Available research on the use of electronic-based communication is generally related to the technology type or presentation format. The research falls into four basic categories. First, with the growth of distance learning, there is some research on the use of video and computer technology that addresses the types of learning that are most conducive to electronic communication and the most effective ways to structure content and present materials. Universities and the American Association of Community Colleges are good resources to identify the types of classes and training conducive to distance learning. For more information on distance learning within education and training environments, visit the web sites of the American Association of Community Colleges at http://www.aacc.nche.edu/ and the United States Distance Learning Association at http://www.usdla.org/.

Second, as noted above, understanding the range of technologies and how they can be used is critical in making a decision to use technology-based conferencing. There is a growing body of work that evaluates the effectiveness of various types of technology and which types of technology can best meet the needs of individual organizations. The Videoconferencing Testbed at Purdue University's CadLab provides information on videoconferencing packages. Its Videoconferencing Database is searchable and can help organizations determine the features of videoconferencing that best meet their needs. Visit http://www.ccm.ecn.purdue.edu/information/research/projects/videoconf/.

Third, considerable attention is devoted to evaluating the costs and benefits of using technology-based communication and conferencing. These costs and benefits are almost always related to the specific applications being considered and the circumstances of the organizations involved. As a result, organizations will want to conduct their own needs assessment and financial analysis before making investment decisions.

Finally, many agencies and organizations have used surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs and applications as they are being developed. An approach such as surveys generally includes providing feedback or evaluation forms directed to conference or event participants. The input they provide can help in evaluating the technology used and the structure of the programming for future events. The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) has used such feedback from its recent satellite downlink presentation. For more information on APHSA's survey results, contact Gary Cyphers at 202/682-0100.

Innovative Practices

The following examples help illustrate the variety of applications and technologies appropriate for technology-based conferencing and communication.

Social Security Administration. The Social Security Administration (SSA) makes extensive use of technology-based conferencing and communication to provide training to 65,000 federal employees and 12,000 state employees. The driving force behind increased technology-based conferencing was to improve timeliness, allow for more efficient training, and improve quality. SSA uses two-way audio, one-way video, and geographically dispersed downlinks among other technologies. Video programming is provided by satellite to more than 772 downlink sites. SSA intends to increase its downlink capabilities to 1,500. SSA has five studios and uses commercial-quality production tools such as chromo key for programming development. It also uses production professionals to work with presenters to ensure high-quality presentations. Productions are often videotaped to make resources available to those not able to participate in the initial presentation. Many training programs use two-way audio to enable participation and feedback from the employees being trained. The effective use of this two-way communication capacity is enhanced by the use of on-site facilitators and electronic equipment that enables presenters to manage the flow of questions. SSA believes strongly that high-quality programming and consistent quality control are essential to the long-term success of videoconferencing. Although SSA has invested heavily in satellite-based videoconferencing, it also is exploring other approaches, such as the use of an intranet to provide training and other resources to individual workers on their own personal computers. Some of SSA's success in using technology is attributed to listening to users' comments on what would meet their needs, enforcing standards, and marketing the technology among staff. For information, contact Phillip Dulaney, deputy director, Office of Training, Social Security Administration, phillip.dulaney@ssa.gov or 410/966-8193.

New York State. In New York, state human service programs are administered through 58 local departments of social services (DSS). The state makes heavy use of technology-based conferencing and communication to provide training to more than 15,000 local employees. New York has made extensive use of satellite-based video presentations, combined with two-way audio links. Currently, the state has 250 fixed installations in local DSS offices and youth and day care facilities. As in the case of the Social Security Administration, New York has focused on the development of high-quality productions that will capture and hold viewers' attention. New York also has computer-based training programs that enable individual offices and workers to schedule training on an as-needed basis. In addition, the state uses agency intranet connections to provide on-line training and uses its web site to make handouts and printed materials available to support videoconferencing. Most local offices have access to downlinks, and the state trains facilitators to assist staff in making the most effective use of video presentations. For more information, contact Peter Miraglia at Peter.Miraglia@dfa.state.ny.us or visit http://www.dfa.state.ny.us.

The National Conference of State Legislatures. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) uses videoconferencing to facilitate communication between its Denver, Colorado, headquarters and its Washington, D.C., office. Conference rooms at both offices have been equipped with videoconferencing equipment, and this capacity is used regularly for joint meetings of the two staffs. The system also is used for special activities, such as budget preparation and conference planning, and to facilitate planning and communication between project staffs located in both cities. For more information, contact Douglas Sacarto at Doug.Sacarto@ncsl.org.

Office of Child Support Enforcement. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) uses videoconferencing for biweekly meetings between the central office and its ten regions. These calls are used for management purposes and to share information on emerging issues and programs. OCSE also uses videoconferencing to facilitate communications among the eight state child support agencies with the largest support collections. In addition, the system has been used for smaller conferencing and one-on-one discussion to improve communications among staff in remote locations. For more information, contact Miles Schlank at mkschlank@acf.dhhs.gov.

National Association of Counties. The National Association of Counties (NACo) is using videoconferencing via satellite downlinks as a means to provide policy-related information and specialized training to local officials. Like most other organizations using videoconferencing, NACo provides printed materials to supplement the video presentations. It also uses facilitators to help participants make the best use of the conference and to provide feedback to the presenters during question-and-answer periods. NACo emphasizes the importance of high-quality productions that take the best possible advantage of the video media and selects topics that are perceived as urgent by likely viewers. NACo contracts for technical support and uses commercial production facilities. For more information, contact Lois Kampinksy at LKampinsky@NACO.org or 202/942-4267.

U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has used videoconferences and audioconferences to communicate policy decisions, program guidance, "Dear Colleague" letters, and information on conferences, workload sharing, and regional and central office collaborative activities. The agency has been able to use technology to reach a large group of individuals, including staff in the ACF central and regional offices and in other HHS agencies, such as ASPE, the Health Care Financing Administration, and SAMHSA; state TANF staff; and staff in other federal agencies, such as the Department of Labor, Department of Transportation, Small Business Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Department of Education. Some of ACF's undertakings have included monthly audioconference calls for its Family Independence Forums, biweekly audioconference calls of its Welfare Reform Strategy Groups, and quarterly satellite-based videoconference calls on welfare. ACF is looking into future LAN-based web presentations in real time. Companies involved in this type of technology are Optibase, Starlight/Starlive Network, and Real Audio-Video. For more information on ACF technology efforts, contact Paul Maiers at pmaiers@acf.dhhs.gov.

American Public Human Services Association. APHSA is expanding its use of technology-based conferencing for state and local training, technical assistance, and workshops. Although APHSA's use of videoconferencing is fairly new, the association has found that this technology offers a viable, effective, and efficient vehicle for reaching people and requires planning, preparation, and coordination. Getting live, interactivity from the sites is critical and is the most formidable challenge. APHSA's initial entrée into videoconferencing was through a satellite downlink presentation. The purpose of this videoconference

was to increase the learning capacity of people who conduct surveys in state and local areas. The event was widely publicized, and no registration fee was required. APHSA, like many other nonprofit organizations, does not have the ideal environment in house to host a satellite conference, so it contracted with The George Washington University for the use of the university's studios. APHSA staff trained with the university staff prior to the videoconference. APHSA found this method to be cost-effective, the quality of the reception was good, and viewers had easy access to downlink sites. In addition to using videoconferencing to communicate, APHSA has developed through the Internet an on-line discussion board that enables individuals to post and answer questions as well as share information. APHSA looks forward to hosting additional videoconferences in the near future. Its next videoconference is scheduled for April 11, 2000, "Making Administrative Data Work for You," 2:00 p.m.–3:30 p.m., Eastern Standard Time. For more information, contact Gary Cyphers at gcyphers@aphsa.org or 202/682-0100, ext. 245.

The Howard University School of Divinity, Faith Community, Distance Learning Center. The school is using videoconferencing to expand learning opportunities to the local church and other religious institutions, colleges, private institutions, and public schools. Howard has used videoconferencing for conducting live surveys and as a counseling tool for the elderly and troubled youth in 300 churches nationwide. Its commitment to technology and training has enabled the school to do videoconferencing to more than 10,000 sites. Through its investments in technology-based conferencing, Howard is creating faith-based distance learning centers that will have training based on their needs. In addition, the school uses videoconferencing to provide staff development training and offers 60 to 70 videoconferences per week. The training sessions are broadcasted via satellite nationwide. Experience has taught Howard that using satellites is very cost-effective and efficient in communicating. However, audiences want to be interactive, so a two-way videoconference should parallel the satellite presentation to ensure interactivity. The use of new technology has proven beneficial in communicating with grassroots representatives who traditionally cannot afford to travel. At this point, the Howard University School of Divinity is entirely interactive. Although some of the sites with which Howard communicates have high-end technology, others do not. Howard has made sure that the presentations it develops are streamed out through different avenues, enabling each site to receive the presentations with the equipment it has on hand. For more information, contact Martel Perry at martelperry@tez.net.

Other Examples. Numerous other organizations use technology-based conferencing and communication for training, information dissemination, and service delivery. For example, the National Governors' Association uses audioconferencing to keep governors' policy advisors abreast of federal policy developments and to formulate state positions on national policy issues. The American Public Human Services Association and other organizations use Internet-based bulletin boards and chat rooms to encourage peer networking and information sharing. Many states also make extensive use of technology-based conferencing for training activities, and national organizations such as the United Way of America use technology-based conferencing to train their local affiliates. Many organizations, including the graduate school of the U.S. Department of Agriculture are looking at combining the use of CD-ROM and DVD materials with the Internet to provide more flexible and tailored programming. The Department of Labor has experimented with the use of videoconferencing in its competitive bidding process for Welfare-to-Work grants.

For More Information

RESOURCE CONTACTS

Center for Law and Social Policy, contact Jodie Levin-Epstein, 202/328-5174; or visit http://www.clasp.org.

Graduate School of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, contact Richard Morton, 202/ 314-3431, or Debora Wasem, 703/917-1020; or visit http://www.usda/grad.

Pacific Bell Knowledge Network Explorer's Videoconferencing for Learning web site, visit http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/vidconf/.

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Education and Training Administration (DOLETA), contact Michelle Burton, 202/219-0024; or visit http://www.doleta.gov.

United Way of America, contact Edmund Berkey, 703/683-7820; or visit http://www.unitedway.org.

Welfare to Work Partnership, contact Elisa Johnson, 202/955-3005; or visit http://www.welfaretowork.org.

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BI-WEEKLY UPDATE

To receive updates on the newest information on research, policies, publication, organizations, technical assistance resources and events related to welfare, workforce, and children and families issues sign up for the Welfare Information Network and the Research Forum on Children and Families web sites e-mail update list. It's simple, just e-mail. **welfinfo@welfareinfo.org** and say **"add me to the e-mail list."** Please tell us, also, the organization you are with.
We look forward to hearing from you.

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