

Case Study: Starfish Family Services

Improving the Lives of Children & Families with Data

About Starfish Family Services

Starfish Family Services is a private, nonprofit human services agency recognized as a champion for families who lack access to essential resources in metropolitan Detroit. Starfish provides high-quality programs and support services that focus on early childhood education and development, behavioral health wellness, and empowered parents. Through a family-centric, integrated approach, they provide access to the right resources at the right time so that community clients achieve long-term success. With an operating budget of over \$45 million and more than 450 employees across 19 centers, the organization serves more than 4,000 children and families each year.

The Opportunity

The mission of the Starfish team is a challenging one – tackling the complexities of family, social, and cultural factors to provide holistic service not only to the individual, but to families and the community at large. Core to the values of Starfish is the potential of every individual and the power of healthy relationships to create long-term positive outcomes for children.

In order to provide this holistic support, information needs to be integrated across the disparate systems, departments, and centers to provide a comprehensive understanding of each unique individual. Robust data not only provides information about the effectiveness of services and what factors provide the best outcomes, but also creates a more warm and welcoming environment. The human connection is critical to supporting families. Data and technology can help enable this connection by linking data between disparate system so that, for example, a supports coordinator in one center is aware of factors that

“If we’re looking at the whole child ... we want to be able to see everything they are getting from us in early childhood, in Head Start and mental health services. We may have a hypothesis that a combination of programs creates better outcomes ... but we can’t prove it until the data is linked.”

– Ann Kalass, CEO

are affecting the child at another center, or at home.

To create this integrated view, Starfish invested in three main initiatives:

- **Master Data Management:** To ensure that a “single view of each child” cascades through all systems and services.
- **Data Warehousing:** to provide enterprise reporting to view outcomes-based impact and operational performance.
- **Data Governance:** to ensure that action, collaboration, and accountability is in place for critical data assets.

Building a Holistic View of Children & Families

The unique value proposition of the Starfish service model is that it provides comprehensive support across education, behavioral health, physical health, and family support. With this breadth of support, however, comes increased complexity as information is stored across more than 20 systems across the agency. Providing an integrated view of each individual across these systems was a challenge, prompting Starfish to move towards a master data management strategy.

A first step in creating a “single view of a child” was to align core terminology and data values across the organization. Seemingly simple

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attributes such as gender and race had different values in each system, making it difficult to integrate. For example, a child might be listed as “White” in one system and “Caucasian” in another. The team created a common data model and business glossary to align key terminology and business rules around critical data elements.

Supporting the flow of data between systems was a second challenge, and the team is currently working to ensure that once common data values are defined, they cascade throughout all systems, with clear understanding of where this data is created and updated. This integration is a key step in allowing staff in all sites to have the same critical information about each child and family member.

Action & Accountability through Data Governance

People are what make Starfish successful and while data can enable success, it requires individuals to take action based on information and to be held accountable for the accuracy of data. Starfish created a Data Governance Committee and defined data stewardship roles across the organization to ensure that data becomes a critical part of the cultural fabric in the daily roles of team members.

The Data Governance Committee is made up of team members across early childhood education, behavioral health, family support, finance, HR, etc. in order to make sure that decisions around data are made in a cross functional way. Notably, two family members of clients are included on the committee to ensure that individuals have a voice in how data is used to support them.

Clear action plans are defined for data issue resolution and committee members work with business data owners and system data stewards to ensure that data decisions are integrated into operational activities.

Award-Winning Operational Efficiencies via Data Management

Operational efficiencies are key to ensuring that the organization is using its resources in the most effective way to support the families it serves. As Starfish CEO, Ann Kalass, often states “We can’t serve our mission without supporting our margin.” The Starfish team makes use of key performance metrics through visual dashboards to ensure that KPIs around staff performance, budget, and data quality are monitored and that action is taken if metrics fall below defined thresholds.



Starfish was recently recognized for its operational excellence in being named as one of the “[Best-Managed Nonprofits](#)” by Crain Business Detroit. The use of data and the accountability and management of information were named as key factors in the award. To date, over \$100K in savings has been identified based on improved data management.

Summary

In today’s information age, the human connection is more valuable than ever, and Starfish Family Services is using the power of data and technology to improve the way it serves families and children. Through an integrated data environment supported by governance and accountability, Starfish is helping to support the potential of every individual and the power of healthy relationships to create long-term positive outcomes for children.