

Modernizing USDA Meals Programs Information Technology

Case Studies in the Integration of
Northrop Grumman Special Nutrition Programs Software

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Case Study

Arkansas Special Nutrition Programs

Arkansas was the birthplace of the Northrop Grumman Special Nutrition Programs web application suite, and to this day the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education at the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) continues to drive innovation and improvement in the software.



Arkansas Special Nutrition Programs website.

The project began in 2005. For years the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services had been encouraging state agencies to take steps to automate their processes and reduce the paperwork burden on both agency staff and program participants. Nonetheless, Arkansas' systems for administering federally funded programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) were still almost completely manual. Sponsors and participants submitted paper applications and claims forms, and DHS staff keyed the information into the state's claim processing system, which was developed by Northrop Grumman in 2001.

The Arkansas Program Administrator had a vision of a dynamic and interactive system that would go beyond the simple automation of existing forms and workflow, and use technology to create new value for the system's users. This new environment would create an entire nutrition program ecosystem to facilitate applications and claims, provide a rich resource library, and deliver training and record the

results online. He wanted applicants to have easy access to their applications to make changes, and for the system to carry over participant information from one year to the next, effectively making the applications permanent agreements with the state. He also wanted the system to seamlessly link applicants and their assigned specialists, enabling applicants to contact their specialist with questions from within the applications themselves.

Northrop Grumman already had a long standing relationship with Arkansas DHS and had been supporting the agency's IT infrastructure for many years. When the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education started down the road to modernization they naturally turned to the company to help make this vision a reality.

Development work started in 2006 and the Applications module of the Special Nutrition Programs software came online in 2007. Over the next several years the Arkansas DHS-Northrop Grumman team would continue to refine requirements and develop system capabilities. By 2010 they had released Claims and Administrative Reviews modules with support for CACFP and the Summer Food Service Program. The system was also integrated with other state and federal systems to meet such needs as Direct Certification of eligible children and child care license verification.

Change management was never taken lightly, and as the various capabilities were deployed there were worries about how the program participants would receive the new innovations. The technology comfort level of the user base was very diverse – some smaller day care providers did not even have computers onsite.

As it turned out, the system was very well received. Program participants realized that the system would save them time and effort. The Arkansas DHS staff worked with those who needed help, fielding phone calls and walking users through the Applications process. When the more complex Claims module came online, the team travelled throughout the state to do live training. In the end, the support and training paid off. Today virtually all applications are filed online and 95% of claims are submitted using the system.

The benefits of the Special Nutrition Programs web applications for both state staff and program participants have been real and tangible. The time to complete an application has been slashed and the claims submission process is both faster and considerably more accurate. State staff can now conduct their administrative reviews and capture the results in the field. All stakeholders have access to a robust resource library and training capabilities.

The USDA has taken notice of Arkansas' commitment to improving process. In its 2011 Management Evaluation, USDA rated the state with *Noteworthy Initiative*, commenting that "AR DHS continues to identify and implement opportunities to make full use of automation to improve access to the CACFP and simplify administration of the Program for institutions as well as State agency staff." The federal agency has also invited the Special Nutrition Programs team to give presentations at its bi-annual national conferences.

In September 2011, the Center for Digital Government recognized Northrop Grumman with the *Best-Fit Integrator Award* for the company's work in Arkansas on the Special Nutrition Programs software. The awards honor firms who tailor technology solutions to suit the unique needs of government, addressing such areas as health and human services; public safety and corrections; and portals and online services.

Today Arkansas DHS is looking to the future. Its next initiative, named Project Streamline, targets additional system improvements designed to increase efficiency and decrease the amount of time needed to perform system related tasks. Highlights of Project Streamline include the development of a universal application for all USDA programs, improved outreach capabilities, and improved access to historical data.

The Special Nutrition Programs software is available to all state agencies that administer USDA meals programs. Northrop Grumman has facilitated integrations to deploy the web applications in Oklahoma, New Jersey and New Mexico. To learn more about the Special Nutrition Programs web applications and the many ways that Northrop Grumman can work to enhance operations for your state's nutrition programs contact us today.

Case Study

Oklahoma Child Nutrition Programs

When the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OKSDE) decided it was time to modernize the state's child nutrition IT infrastructure, they turned to the team at Northrop Grumman Special Nutrition Programs as a trusted partner. OKSDE was aware of Northrop Grumman's work in Arkansas developing an online application and claims system for United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services programs, and wanted to bring the process and performance gains realized in Arkansas to the user community in Oklahoma. Northrop Grumman facilitated a mutually beneficial technology transfer with the Arkansas Department of Human Services, and collaborated with the nutrition program experts at OKSDE to customize the Arkansas system to meet Oklahoma's unique requirements.

Today, the Oklahoma Child Nutrition Programs website provides a full-service portal to information and web-based software tools for accessing federally funded USDA nutrition programs. In addition to new capabilities and a vastly improved user experience, the new tools have delivered tangible benefits to OKSDE, speeding processing time, lightening staff workload, and reducing administrative errors.



Oklahoma Child Nutrition Programs website.

The Special Nutrition Programs web application suite is at the heart of the Child Nutrition Programs website. Primary features of the software include the Online Application system used by qualified organizations and facilities to apply to the OKSDE administered Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Online Claims system used by service providers to submit claims for reimbursement.

Prior to the launch of the new web applications suite, much of the process to support USDA funded programs remained manual. Providers were completing paper forms, and staff were routing those forms through workflow. In addition to the time required to complete the forms, the manual steps introduced many opportunities for errors which could lead to re-work or even loss of deserved benefits to organizations. Significant hours were spent by OKSDE staff on the telephone providing support to people completing forms and helping people track the status of applications and claims.

Beyond the basic workflow around the applications and claims processes, the Child Nutrition Program Administrator recognized the need for a central location, or gateway, for stakeholders of these federal programs. Oklahoma providers and OKSDE staff needed a tool by which they could access resource documents, training, federal government websites and other online assets.

Utilizing a state-to-state technology transfer, OKSDE was able to acquire the core system without the need to pay a license fee. Northrop Grumman was awarded a contract to perform the system implementation and to customize the software to meet the specific needs of Oklahoma and accomplish the vision of OKSDE leadership.

Oklahoma's decision to transfer the Arkansas system to Oklahoma not only provided a cost effective solution that could be implemented quickly, it also fostered increased collaboration and communication between the two states. This technology transfer allowed the states to share ideas, best practices and the cost of enhancements needed to comply with frequently changing federal regulations.

OKSDE was able to benefit from Northrop Grumman's in depth knowledge of the federal process as well as the company's considerable experience in systems integration and discipline in requirements gathering and implementation. The result is a robust, state-of-the-art website that meets all federal and state requirements while delivering added value and a vastly improved user experience.

The implementation of the Special Nutrition Programs suite of web applications has decreased application processing and claim submission times. Granting providers access to their application and claim data online has also greatly reduced the number of phone calls received by office staff. Providers do not need to call to determine the status of their application or claims. They have access to that information online. The time which used to be spent processing paper forms and answering phones is now spent providing additional program oversight and administration.

The system now carries application data forward from year to year. This carry-forward feature is a significant business process improvement for providers and staff, greatly reducing the annual workload for both. Other areas in which the application suite have provided business process improvement include simplification of payment batch preparation and improved claim validation against eligibility data, reducing the chance for fraud or claim errors requiring repayment.

Since these capabilities are delivered as web applications, users can access the functionality from virtually any computer without the use of special software. This universal access means that citizens, organizations, and OKSDE staff all interact with the system using the same interface. The general familiarity with web applications makes the system intuitive to use and minimizes the need for user training and support.

The system includes many capabilities that reflect innovative uses of technology to improve user experiences and provide enhanced functionality by integrating with other services and systems. For example, integration with Google Maps provides interactive maps that allow parents to search for providers in their area and see the services those providers offer. As another example, the system features connectivity to state accounting systems and excluded provider databases allowing OKSDE staff generate payments and view warrant data, and ensure that excluded providers are not allowed to participate or submit claims.

Oklahoma has achieved a 100% usage rate for the online system among all institutions participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and office staff assigned to the program. There are currently 636 independent institutions using the program. There are also 84 sponsors using the program who represent 2,500 facilities.

In this time of increasing performance demands and constrained education and human services budgets, OKSDE's partnership with Northrop Grumman has enabled the department to achieve its improvement objectives efficiently and effectively. To learn more about the Special Nutrition Programs web applications and the many ways that Northrop Grumman can work to enhance operations for your state's nutrition programs contact us today.