Connecticut Office of Early Childhood

Title: OEC Parent Portal Nomination for NASCIO Award 2022

Category: Digital Services: Government to Citizen

State: Connecticut

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Project Completion Date: Aug 2021

Executive Summary

Parents with young children, especially those in low-to-moderate income families, continue to be challenged by ever-increasing childcare costs. In order to make childcare affordable for eligible families, the State of Connecticut offers the Care 4 Kids (C4K) program, funded by the Federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) Plan. In the C4K program, the family share of the childcare cost is determined by the family's State Median Income.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) is a state agency that oversees an array of programs and services that support young children and families, including the administration of the C4K program. OEC now offers a significant digital innovation with the Parent Portal, including prescreening for eligibility determination, uploading required verifications and other documentation, and online application to the C4K program. In addition to automating manual processes, significantly reducing paper, and providing in context help to the complex and counterintuitive paper application; this project also extends resident access through a responsive design available through any Internet-connected desktop or mobile device.

The OEC C4K Parent Portal executes on several items underscored in the State CIO Strategies, Policy Issues and Management Processes' Top 10 Priorities, including the need to provide digital services (allowing customers digital access to the C4K application process), identity and access management (requiring user verification and authentication, thus creating a secure environment and increased trust between families and the State), and cloud-based services.

The OEC Parent Portal is closely aligned with the State of Connecticut's Enterprise IT Strategy, making the onboarding of additional programs across agencies easier. Eventually this can serve as a model for single point of entry between State of Connecticut and its citizens providing direct access to additional government services online. The State of Connecticut is now in the initial planning phases of the CT Digital Services (CTDS) project, where several Health and Human Services Agencies are coming together to establish a common unified front door for the citizens, and upon entry, orient them and connect them to support their relevant needs. Because of its fit and extensibility, the OEC Parent Portal is included in the first round of the CTDS project.

The State of Connecticut's OEC Parent Portal most importantly delivers value by:

- **Benefitting CT citizens** (ease of use, saves time and resources, more clarity into application and screening, more contextual help, 24/7 system availability)

- **Benefitting OEC** (operational effectiveness, 75% adoption of the online portal, 50% reduction in phone calls, 24% reduction in illegible applications, 52% reduction in incomplete applications, reduction in operational and printing costs)

- **Aligning with the State's Enterprise IT Plan** (Ability to extend beyond Child Care to other State offerings to citizens)

Idea

OEC administers the C4K program which helps low to moderate income families in Connecticut pay for childcare. The OEC Parent Portal significantly improves the existing customer experience by giving C4K families online access to the program through a digital, user-friendly, and accessible portal. Prior to this project, a C4K family could only access paper-based manual processes (mail-in, fax, or drop-off) to pursue their childcare needs. The process was time-consuming, complex, and difficult to understand. The easy-to-use Self-Service Portal enables families to access various C4K services online. They can apply for the program, prescreen for program eligibility, upload required verifications and other documentation, and/or view program data and history. Improved C4K business processes provide clear, intuitive instruction throughout, enabling families to make better informed childcare decisions

We didn't reinvent the wheel for online childcare services; however, we did use research-led guiding principles to create a powerful product with intuitive features. Below are some key differentiators:

- **Research-based human centered design principles** – Users are at the heart of our design principles. We sought to understand and rectify areas with which families struggled – as well as those that agency workers found challenging. We implemented a dynamic visual representation to help clarify pre-screening and enable families to better understand how/whether they meet program criteria.

- **Streamlined business processes and workflows with information that people understand, tailored to their needs** – Our users need "just-in-time" information, in easy-to-understand language, that clarifies what is needed next. This includes a personalized checklist that dynamically creates a list of required documents based on the family's application data.

- **Seamless integration with external systems to achieve the State's "one-stop" vision** - People want a personalized experience in which they can access the latest C4K data on a single platform quickly, easily, and at a location and time convenient to them.

- **Digital communication channel for friendly reminders and nudges** to help families stay compliant –Such measures help to avoid coverage gaps.

- **Do-it-yourself reports and dashboards for real-time insights** – Our solution allows State agency leaders to track real-time business metrics on demand by building their own reports and dashboards with a "drag and drop" approach that requires no technical background.
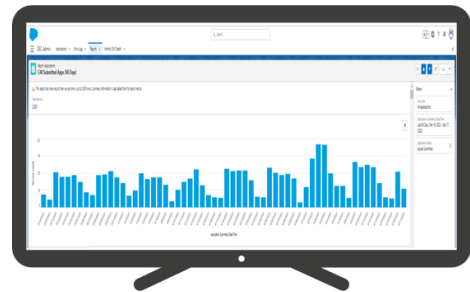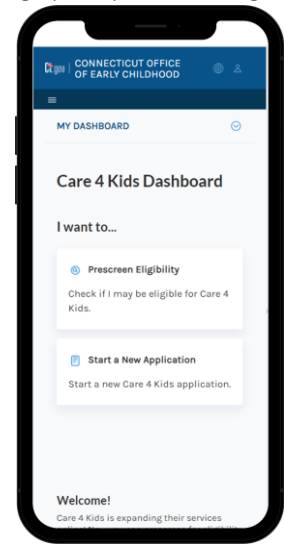
As Governor Lamont directed his agencies to find efficiencies with technology, we created the OEC Parent Portal with broad extensibility. The platform can be configured to accommodate other social service programs administered by the State. This allows multiple agencies to utilize a single application process that maximizes customer interaction, avoids duplicate data entry by applicants, and improves the overall citizen-agency relationship across programs.

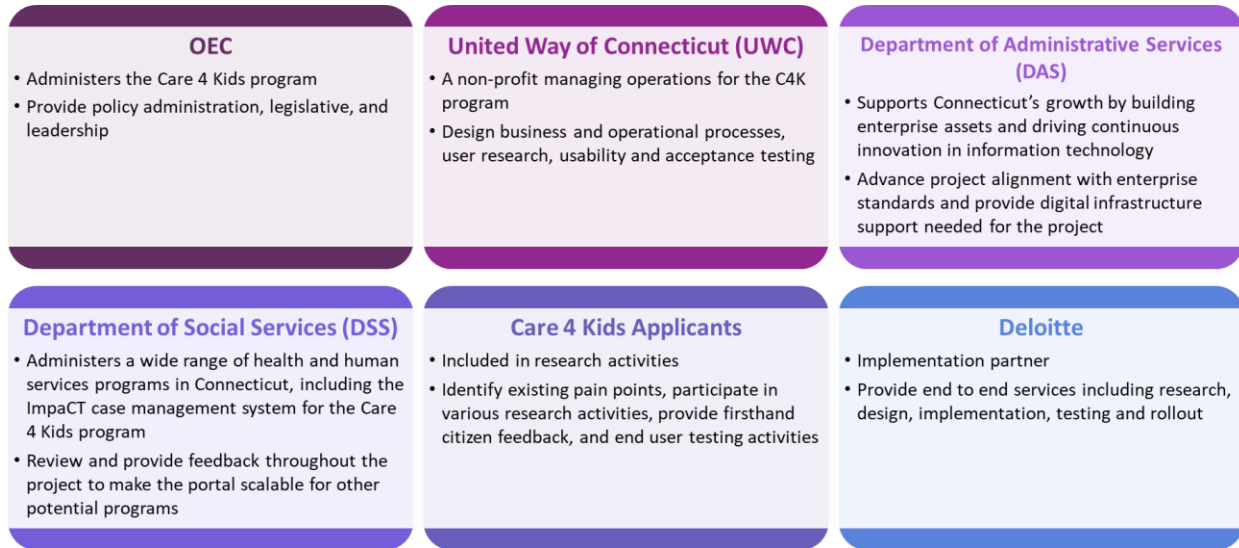The OEC Parent Portal addresses the changing digital landscape and the importance of providing services that allow for secure, efficient, and accessible completion of business processes. These priorities were underscored in the State CIO Strategies, Policy Issues and Management Processes' top 10 priorities, which include the need to provide digital services, identity and access management, and cloud-based services.

Implementation

The OEC Parent Portal is part of a larger State initiative to digitize services from all state agencies, moving customers from "in line" to "online." Guided by the State's IT Strategic Plan for FY22, the project reflects enterprise goals such as IT optimization, accelerating digital government services and improving cybersecurity statewide.

A Hybrid Agile approach supported design, development, and testing incrementally in sprints. "Teamwork makes the dream work" was our project mantra. From project initiation to implementation and rollout it was a "one team" effort which included stakeholders from multiple groups.

OEC
- Administers the Care 4 Kids program
- Provide policy administration, legislative, and leadership

United Way of Connecticut (UWC)
- A non-profit managing operations for the C4K program
- Design business and operational processes, user research, usability and acceptance testing

Department of Administrative Services (DAS)
- Supports Connecticut's growth by building enterprise assets and driving continuous innovation in information technology
- Advance project alignment with enterprise standards and provide digital infrastructure support needed for the project

Department of Social Services (DSS)
- Administers a wide range of health and human services programs in Connecticut, including the ImpaCT case management system for the Care 4 Kids program
- Review and provide feedback throughout the project to make the portal scalable for other potential programs

Care 4 Kids Applicants
- Included in research activities
- Identify existing pain points, participate in various research activities, provide firsthand citizen feedback, and end user testing activities

Deloitte
- Implementation partner
- Provide end to end services including research, design, implementation, testing and rollout

Stakeholders worked together as a team to make this project a success before, during, and after the implementation. This includes approvals and decisions needed for research, design, development, and testing phases of the sprint build. Additionally, these stakeholders worked together to develop a comprehensive marketing plan that leveraged social media to announce and incrementally roll out the portal to the public.

The OEC Parent Portal leveraged many existing team resources and procured new resources to achieve project objectives. Specifics by resource type are provided below.

Financial

The OEC Parent Portal was funded by the Federal CCDF grant. Approximately $2M was spent on implementation partner services and support to bring the OEC Parent Portal live. In addition, 1.5 FTEs of United Way of CT were involved in the development stages, and 3 FTEs for review of documents, and testing. All throughout the project, 4 OEC staff members spent approximately 15-20 hours each week for 7-8 months.

Human

Our approach was human-centered and engaged varied stakeholder groups for a diversity of perspectives. Across project phases, resources ranged from 15 to 35 individuals.

Time

Our project timeline was implemented in just under 7 months from project kick-off to production go--live. This timeline was made possible with the full cooperation of all stakeholders as well as the low code/no code Salesforce platform.

Architecture

Reusability and extensibility are central to our solution. The Salesforce-based community portal brings all the benefits of a cloud-based solution to the OEC which can further be extended to other agencies in the State. Our platform comes equipped with low code/no code abilities and responsive web technologies that make the portal accessible on multiple devices. Additionally, our solution leverages GovShield, which provides elevated cybersecurity and data privacy required by the agency. Our project leverages MuleSoft as a platform for integration to transfer data with external partners and systems.
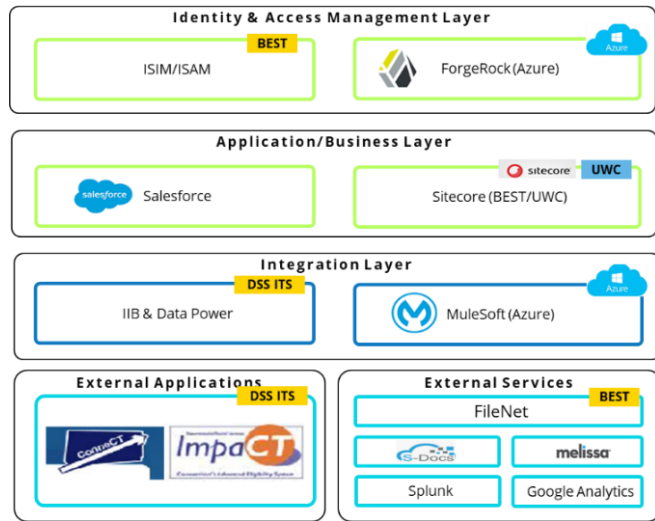
Impact

C4K Families need to be able to enroll their children in childcare with confidence. The intuitive, straightforward, and helpful design of the OEC Parent Portal makes this possible. Parents can more readily learn about childcare options, pre-screen, and apply. Document verifications are also digitized, and thus much easier to complete.

The OEC landscape has changed significantly with the addition of this new online portal for the C4K program.

Environment Before

Individuals needed to travel into the office, fax, or mail in an application, sometimes needing to take off work to apply for Childcare.

During application submission, it was often unclear to residents what documentation they needed to provide to be approved

Citizens were unclear of the processing status of their application, many times going more than a month without hearing an update.

Many citizens relied heavily on providers and call center staff to help them to submit their application and required documentation for the program.

Applications were received incomplete, and Case Managers had trouble reading and processing handwritten applications.

On average, the C4K program received around 850 applications a month through the paper process.

Environment After

The OEC Parent Portal allows citizens to apply for the program when and how it is convenient to them.

The OEC Parent Portal builds a checklist for users, so they know what to upload based on the information contained within their application.

The online portal provides real-time, online feedback regarding status, removing guesswork and/or time delays.

With the portal, users are empowered to own their application process and use the tools and tips provided during the guided application process to complete and submit the application on their own. This led to a 50% reduction in phone calls to Care 4 Kids for assistance in completing the application.

With the digitization of the application, there was a 24% reduction in illegible application and 52% reduction in incomplete applications (no signature).

On average, the Care 4 Kids program now receives around 1050 applications a month where 70% of those applications are submitted online.

Since the rollout of the OEC Parent Portal, stakeholders have gathered insights and feedback from customers and program staff to understand how families/staff have been able to benefit from having online access to the C4K application. From this feedback, largely positive reviews of the Parent Portal have reinforced the importance of adapting to stakeholder needs in a changing digital world. Supporting metrics and feedback include:

- Citizens benefit from the online application by gaining efficiencies that a paper-based process cannot provide. For example, citizens save time and energy by not traveling into the agency office/provider location to complete and submit applications in person. Instead, they can use their smartphone to submit the application online, at their leisure. This in turn reduces travel time and saves cost associated to snail mail, printing and copying of required documentation required by the agency.

- Citizens also benefit by gaining an easy to understand, step-by-step look into the application and program requirements in English and Spanish languages. From research, the agency learned that at the time of application many citizens do not understand C4K program eligibility requirements or how their data is used to determine eligibility. This led to the development of the pre-screening tool where citizens have completed and checked their potential eligibility more than 16k times, prior to applying for the program.

- As of today, the OEC Parent Portal, in less than a year after its rollout, has benefited several new and existing families with accessing its new online capabilities. Below are a few statistics that show how the citizens of CT are using this portal to their advantage:

  - 9,604   Families signed up for a new account

  - 8,761   New applications submitted

  - 17,011 Supporting documents uploaded

- The success of the project can be best measured through its adoption by the citizens. As of April 2022, 72% of all C4K applications were submitted through the online portal.

- The state benefits from the OEC Parent Portal through increased worker efficiencies by automating processes that require manual interventions by multiple teams for processing paper applications. For example, workers no longer need to spend time determining whether a document belongs to a certain application or person. All documents submitted through the portal are automatically associated with the application. Additionally, the system generated application prevents workers from needing to decipher handwritten details from the citizen, because those are already entered and stored by the citizens, ultimately reducing errors, and preventing re-work of applications.

- The digital capabilities within the OEC Parent Portal eliminates the need for printing/scanning/storing of paper applications thus helping the state move towards a more sustainable environment.

- The state also benefits from reduced costs in operations, technology, and administration of the C4K program. The overall cost savings can be seen across application processing costs for case processing workers, call center specialists, and document scanning costs.

Across multiple stakeholder groups, we've heard that we are making the lives of users easier – with greater process clarity, better tools, and enhanced confidence overall. Highlights of feedback received appear in the following table.

Topic	What we heard
C4K Citizen Testimony	• "The process really saved me so many hours of travel, I just filled out the form right online [and] did not have to print it out" • "Saves time and money as we do not have to print and fax" • "Process is easy, fast and convenient" • "Less confusion regarding what documents to submit with the application as the portal told me what to upload"
Client Service Representative Quotes Testimony	• "Parents are happy with the ease and convenience of the online application" • "Eliminates incomplete applications" • "The online application is a much more streamlined process for all"
Eligibility Services Specialist Testimony	• "Applications are very streamlined and easy to follow" • "Allows me to process applications at a much quicker and more efficient rate" • "Easy to read, the pages aren't being submitted out of order. Makes applications such a breeze"

Though we are pleased with what we've accomplished to date, we know that there is even more we can do to support our customers as well as our staff. Plans include efforts, across the State of Connecticut, to enhance our digital presence and greater ease of use for residents. Additionally, the team plans to implement future releases in which new system features will roll out that enhance the overall experience for citizens. Some of the enhancements prioritized for these releases are:

• Changes that allow users to submit renewals and interim changes;

• Updates that provide the ability to opt-in to electronic correspondence (reducing paper notice printing and postage costs and increasing user convenience); and

• Enhance integration with worker portal for applications, renewals, and changes.

The OEC team and the State of CT are extremely excited about the OEC Parent Portal implementation and the overall implications the project has on the online presence for the State. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was critical to provide citizens with an ability to interact remotely with the program. The OEC delivered on this and realized significant gains from its initial investment. The portal is an important first step toward creating a unified experience for residents to connect with the State of CT when applying for state benefits. The extensibility of this platform permits onboarding of additional programs across different agencies, eventually serving as a single point of entry and contact between Connecticut and its residents.