

Family Preservation and Assessment System

Hillsborough County,
Florida, US



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Summary

Hillsborough County's Family Preservation and Assessment System is a county-wide data-sharing platform in the children services sector. Hillsborough County had one of the worst crises of children in care in the state of Florida. The purpose of the Family Preservation and Assessment System is to enable the unification of the multiple sources of data regarding families with a child at risk of being abused or neglected, or a child in care. Hillsborough County, in partnership with EY, has designed this tool to help realize the vision of preservation of families through targeted early intervention and support. The system was deployed in the community in March 2021.



The key problem that required a solution

- ▶ There was no dynamic real-time access to data, including prevention and diversion data.
- ▶ Data in varying formats resided in disparate systems throughout the state, and in Hillsborough County.
- ▶ There was often poor integration and coordination across the Florida Abuse Hotline counsellors, child protective investigators (CPIs) providers and caseworkers.

Aims of the new system

The Family Preservation and Assessment System aims to be an integrated and collaborative system of care that gets “the right data to the right people at the right time.” Specifically, it will allow:

- ▶ Dynamic availability of data to CPIs and caseworkers for more effective and timely intervention with families
- ▶ Expedient and accurate completion of assessments, with a focus on quality of referrals and crisis needs
- ▶ Implementation and adoption of interoperable technology solutions that will allow for exchanges of data, business intelligence, predictive analytics and integrated service delivery models across related social services



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Innovation description

Context/background

Hillsborough County identified the lack of multiservice collaboration and data sharing as a major obstacle to providing the prevention and diversion it aimed for. Vital intelligence regarding struggling families and vulnerable children was dispersed across multiple data systems, making it difficult for caseworkers to have a holistic picture of the families they were working with in the short time frames necessary for some of the interventions (i.e., the removal of a child from an unsafe home). “We’re bouncing around in multiple different data systems that have different protocols and naming functions, so it makes it very complicated for people to manage the information and to get their jobs done in this environment,” stated Christopher Card, Chief of Community-Based Care at Eckerd Connects, the private contractor that delivers child and juvenile care services in the county.

With the system Hillsborough County had in place, its approach was principally reactive, typically helping families once a crisis occurred. It identified data analytics and intelligence sharing as a lever to improve these services and approached EY for help in developing such a platform.

US states have the opportunity to leverage two federal provisions as they embark on identifying and implementing their prevention plans to support families at risk of entering the child welfare system. These provisions are the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS).

The FFPSA, signed in 2018, changed the federal child welfare financing streams. Its goal is to provide services to families that are at risk of entering the child welfare system, with a focus on preventing children from entering foster care by allowing federal reimbursement for mental health services, substance abuse treatment and in-home parenting skills training. It also aims to improve the well-being of children already in foster care by incentivizing states to reduce the placement of children in group homes.

The CCWIS, published by the Federal Government Administration for Children & Families in 2016, paves the way for child welfare agencies and state departments for children and families to invest in interoperable systems that are conducive to data sharing, in contrast to the current legacy monolithic systems that the Federal Government promoted previously.

In the words of Ramin Kouzehkanani, CIO of Hillsborough County, “I felt the Act [FFPSA] presented a unique opportunity for showcasing the value of community-wide data sharing to help identify those families that are already experiencing challenges and may be receiving services disparately with preventative, proactive, holistic and integrated services to help them preserve their families and avoid entering the child welfare system.” Hillsborough County has been driving the initiative locally and encouraging the state to adopt and implement a similar approach.

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Ramin Kouzehkanani
CIO of Hillsborough County

Innovation components/approach

The aim of the Family Preservation and Assessment System is to bring together data from multiple “touch points” of a family under stress, including the Department of Children’s Services, Clerk of Court, the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay (211) and the Department of Children and Families Abuse Hotline. As these are disparate data sources, the Family Preservation and Assessment System relies on data such as post codes, gender, age or family relations to be able to match the different sources and create a unified dataset. Using all the aggregated data, an algorithm flags up potential candidates for early intervention to a caseworker in a community assessment center, based on variables that Hillsborough County has selected as markers of stress in households. The caseworker is then able to identify the most appropriate services that could be offered to the family for support.

Target population

The target population of the Family Preservation and Assessment System is the families of Hillsborough County. Currently, the target population is defined as families under stress; however, the county is awaiting a definition of candidacy from the state. This definition will allow the algorithm to be further refined to best identify and support families that are likely to have contact with the child care system.

Key stakeholders

Hillsborough County has proactively pursued relationships with a variety of stakeholders to create a full network of potential input into the Family Preservation and Assessment System. Its strategy has been to build relationships over time and develop trust. “It’s a personal relationship. Different entities are just people that we know,” stated Christopher Card. All the stakeholders interviewed commented on how much the services benefited from just “being in the room” together and working in a more collaborative way during the development of the system. Key stakeholders include the following:

- ▶ **Hillsborough County:** under the leadership of Ramin Kouzehkanani, CIO, with the support of Commissioner Sandra Murman
- ▶ **Eckerd Connects:** the private provider under contract in the state for the delivery of child welfare programs
- ▶ **Hillsborough County’s Blue Ribbon Committee for Child Safety (BRCCS):** a group of community partners in law enforcement, the judiciary, crisis centers, Eckerd Kids, juvenile justice, education, Children’s Board, and other local child welfare and behavioral health service providers
- ▶ **Department of Children and Families:** which authorized data sharing for the project

- ▶ **Healthy Start:** which is focused on the infant population (0-1 age group), representing the largest share of children being removed from homes
- ▶ **Children’s Home Network:** which offers family and kinship finding services, and helps families identify their informal supports



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Evidence of impact

The development journey of the Family and Preservation and Assessment System has led to significant achievements in the path towards increased data integration and analysis. For Ramin Kouzehkanani, the executed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between Hillsborough County and the state of Florida, and between Hillsborough County and the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, are changing the siloed ways in which social services are delivered. Setting the precedent for data sharing and collaboration is a cultural change that he hopes will outlive everyone currently involved in this effort. These MoUs will be housed in Florida's state technology agency's central repository for other municipalities and entities to leverage.



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Key challenges

The key challenges faced by Hillsborough County include data sharing, data security, government resistance, funding and public acceptance.

- ▶ **Data sharing:** the data needed for the Family Preservation and Assessment System is owned by different departments across the state and within Hillsborough County, each with its own rules about who can have access. Multiple rounds of discussion were needed to align on issues of privacy and data security. Through these discussions, leading partners found that often, confidentiality was used as the reason why different groups were hesitant to even begin discussing data sharing.
- ▶ **Data security:** as Patrick Minzie II, Director at Hillsborough County's Department of Children's Services, stated, "A breach of security would be detrimental to the willingness of data holders to share their data, and to the public's trust in intelligence gathering data strategies."
- ▶ **Government resistance:** it is uncommon for a county government to propose a solution such as the Family Preservation and Assessment System, as these types of programs would typically be driven by the state. Added to the novelty of this project, Hillsborough

County faced several challenges to get approval.

In Commissioner Sandra Murman's view, "We just have to get to work and prove the outcomes that we said we were going to get." This, she hopes, will pave the way for state-wide adoption of the platform.

- ▶ **Funding:** the Family Preservation and Assessment System was initially funded by the county, but securing future funding for the project is an ongoing priority. State adoption, ownership and sponsorship of the tool would ensure its sustainability for the future.
- ▶ **Public acceptance:** one of the main challenges is to ensure that the Family Preservation and Assessment System is not seen as intrusive or biased by the community. The team is working to fine-tune its platform so that the variables used reflect stress in the household without introducing any biases in the system. According to Ramin Kouzehkanani, "The 'why' and the 'how' have to be explained to the community. If we don't do our job right there, it will effectively destroy Hillsborough's intentions."



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Key enablers

Hillsborough County has taken key steps to ensure the success of the Family Preservation and Assessment System. These include seizing the opportunity presented by government leadership, engaging key stakeholders early on, developing a clear vision, securing top-level county support, driving change locally, co-developing the solution with its intended users, and securing workforce buy-in.

- ▶ **Government leadership:** Patrick Minzie II, is the Director of Hillsborough County's Department of Children's Services. In his view, it is not enough that the Government enacts policies - there must be a redirection of funding to back them: "We follow the money and the policy. Government-led change requires that the Government invests its dollars in the overall policy that is being set." Hillsborough County's development of the Family Preservation and Assessment System is a direct result of funding being made available for innovative solutions through the FFPSA. Commissioner Murman and her Blue Ribbon Committee set up the groundwork and the connections necessary for the Family Preservation and Assessment System to become a reality, but funding was required. As the FFPSA was enacted, Hillsborough County embraced this legislation as the catalyst for change that could help develop the system.

- ▶ **Key stakeholder engagement:** to make this project a reality, Hillsborough County knew that it could not carry out this task alone. Commissioner Murman set up the Blue Ribbon Committee with the aim of tackling the unfortunate situation that Hillsborough County was facing with regards to child welfare. This brought the appropriate people together at the table. "You need to collaborate, bring people together and take the time necessary to get them onboard with the shared vision. It takes time, but that's a worthwhile exercise in making sure people are buying into the project. Then, include them in the execution to the extent possible, so that it's an execution at the local level, so they stay bought in and they stay aware and they stay on your team getting this done. This is the biggest lesson learned to me," stated Christopher Card.
- ▶ **Clear vision:** Hillsborough County had a clear vision for the Family Preservation and Assessment System before development and implementation started and ensured that all the stakeholders involved in the project were aligned with regard to its goals and intent. Hillsborough County's vision was able to permeate and change the way in which its collaborators were thinking about child welfare. Every person interviewed, from the Commissioner to the private contractors, was able to identify and articulate Hillsborough County's vision for the system: to enable the provision of

targeted early intervention and support for families under stress and imminent risk of entering the foster care system. Having a clear, shared vision reduces the risk of a project being abandoned if its main champion leaves the organization.

- ▶ **Top-level county support:** all stakeholders interviewed agreed that without Commissioner Murman's support, the development of the Family Preservation and Assessment System would not have been possible. Ramin Kouzehkanani was identified by all stakeholders interviewed as the main champion of the project and the driver of its success, with the ability to rally all the members of the collaborative and maintain everyone's focus on the ultimate goal. Commissioner Murman and Ramin Kouzehkanani were able to leverage their deep experience in state and federal legislation and funding to support their long-held vision of reforms in child services.
- ▶ **Local, bottom-up innovation:** support and funding from Hillsborough County allowed the intervention to be driven locally, from the bottom up, ensuring that the Family Preservation and Assessment System would encapsulate the local needs. "Working with the people on the ground and building it up from there," Christopher Card stated. In his view, it is key to work with the organizations that are already on the ground and that families know.

This will ensure that the solution is tailored to their needs, while building on the trust that these organizations already have in the community.

- ▶ **Co-development with users:** Hillsborough County is one of the few counties in Florida in which children services are part of the Sheriff's duties, rather than the state's, meaning that CPIs are employees of the Sheriff's Office. Collaboration with the Sheriff's Office has been key to developing a tool that CPIs can access to make time-critical essential judgments on the removal of at-risk children. Heather Cazzola, Director of Diversion & Prevention at Eckerd Connects, was closely involved in the process of adapting a platform provided by EY, which was implemented in Australia with a similar objective. She oversaw the process of ensuring that the resulting output was tailored to Hillsborough's needs. As Heather put it, "It gave us an idea of something to start with, but the framework and everything we've done is very different from the platform in Australia because our needs are different. They've really been able to adapt to our specific county and state needs, as opposed to just taking something that is cookie-cutter and trying to make it work".
- ▶ **Workforce buy-in:** regardless of how much CPIs can benefit from having better access to the data related to their cases, if this tool is seen as disruptive to their work, it will not be used. Since the inception of this program, one of the goals of the Family Preservation and Assessment System was to provide CPIs with more information about their cases so that they can make better, more informed decisions. This has driven the team to ensure that input from potential users is incorporated

into the system early on. So far, they have seen a very positive acceptance of the Family Preservation and Assessment System, as this is seen as "the right time and the right project and the right thing to do," according to Christopher Card.

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Heather Cazzola

Director of Diversion & Prevention at Eckerd Connects



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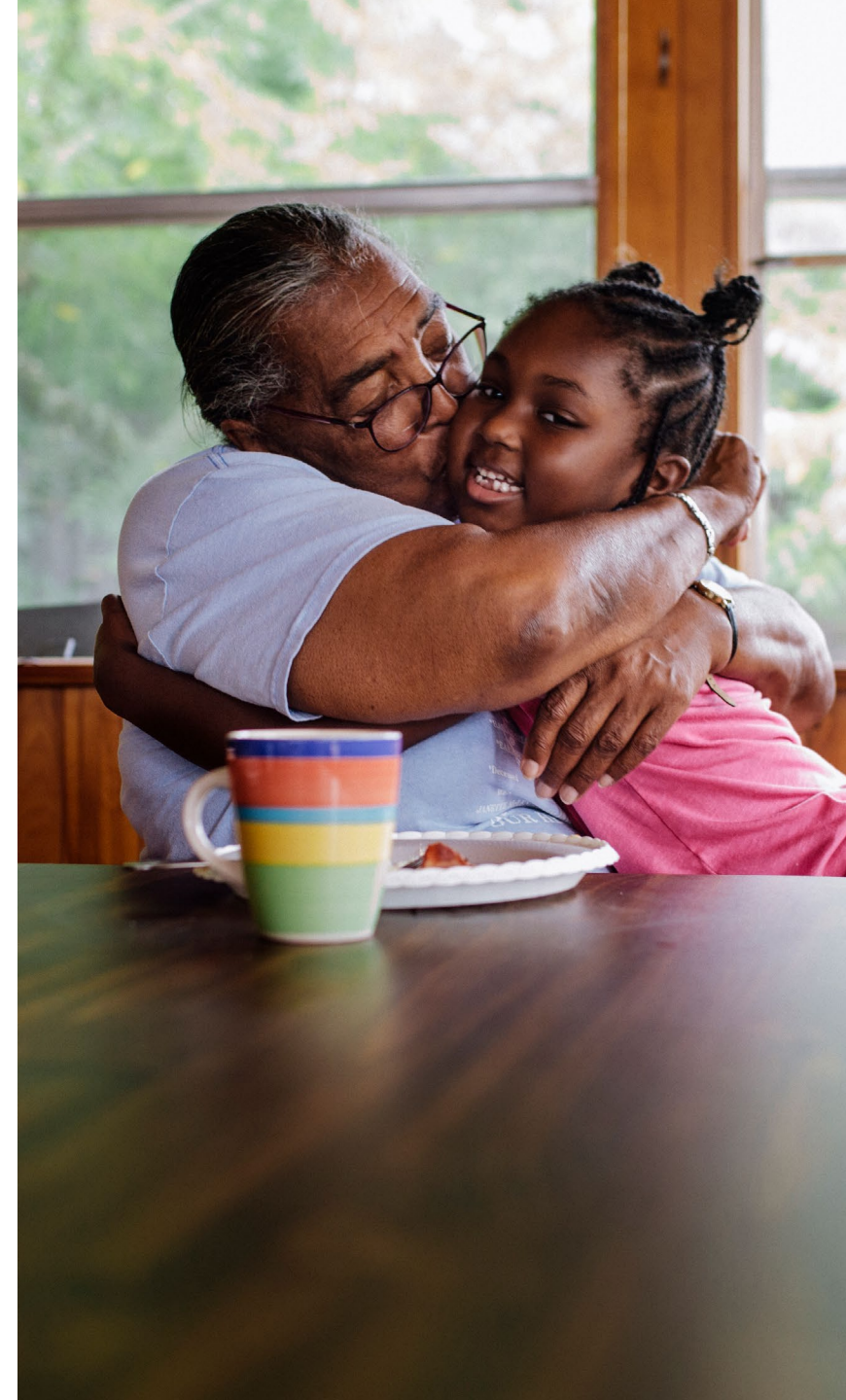
Future plans

The pilot program for the Family Preservation and Assessment System has launched, and Hillsborough County is in discussions with other counties across Florida to broaden its reach. The FFPSA requires states to submit their prevention models to the Federal Government for approval. Florida is currently working to finalize its plan for submission, which must include the state's definition of "candidacy" (families at risk of entering the child welfare system). This will be used to identify the relevant data to be used in the Family Preservation and Assessment System. Prior to this definition, the platform is designed as Hillsborough County's attempt to help identify families under stress that can benefit from prevention services.

In the short term, practical next steps include the following:

- ▶ Finalizing the legal requirements for data collection and sharing, including the data security plan and associated protocols
- ▶ Establishing a community-wide aggregated data lake

- ▶ Identifying further datasets (beyond the three initial ones) to be included in the Family Preservation and Assessment System
- ▶ Improving the current analytics platform to allow for more advanced analysis, such as predictive analytics and real-time data visualization



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- ▶ Ramin Kouzehkanani, CIO, Hillsborough County, interviewed on 25 August 2020
- ▶ Commissioner Sandra Murman, Hillsborough County, interviewed on 1 September 2020
- ▶ Patrick Minzie, II, Director, Department of Children's Services, Hillsborough County, interviewed on 27 August 2020
- ▶ Christopher Card, Chief of Community-Based Care, Eckerd Connects, interviewed on 27 August 2020
- ▶ Heather Cazzola, Director of Diversion & Prevention, Eckerd Connects, interviewed on 28 August 2020
- ▶ Jatin Gola, Data and Analytics Lead, EY, interviewed on 18 September 2020

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