Improving the Safety Net through Data Sharing

National Association for Welfare Research and Statistics Workshop

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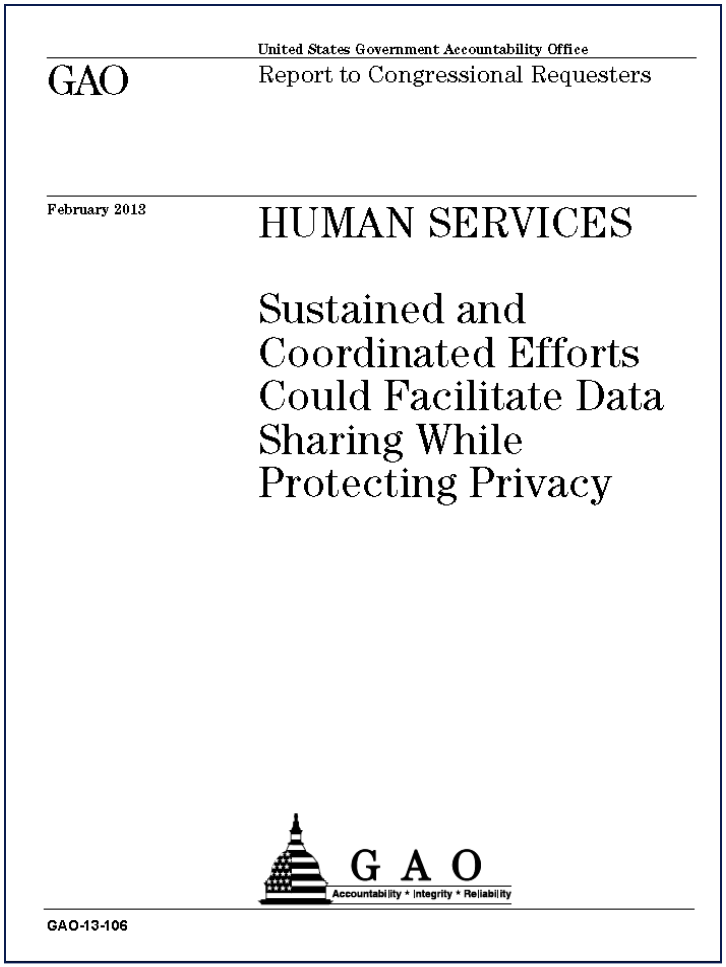
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)

Human Services: Sustained and Coordinated Efforts Could Facilitate Data Sharing While Protecting Privacy

- GAO-13-106
- www.gao.gov



Why We Did This Study

- The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), an independent, nonpartisan agency, is the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of the U.S. Congress.

- Request from House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources

Research Objectives

1. In what ways have selected states or localities implemented promising data sharing practices across programs to improve their administration of human services?

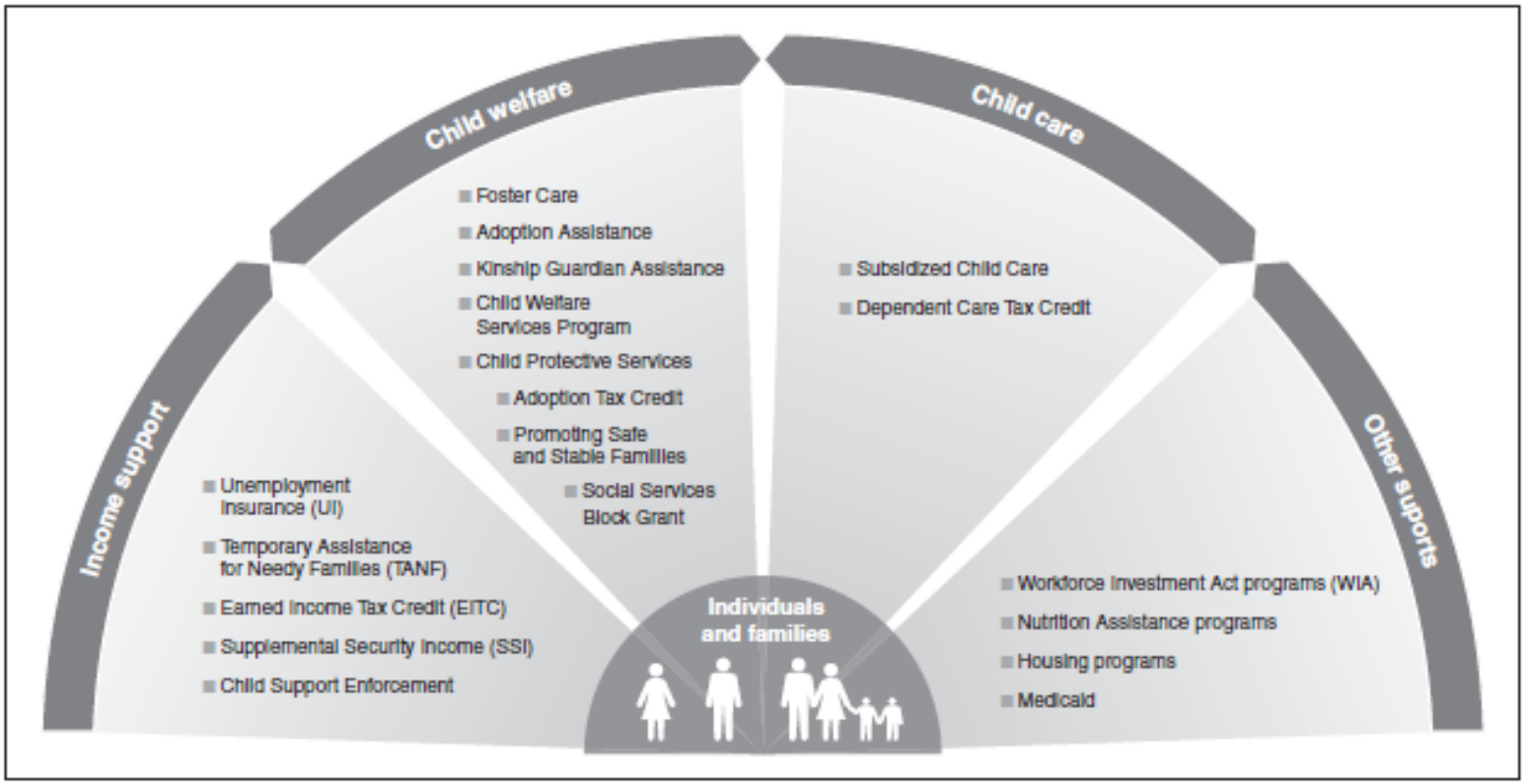
2. What did stakeholders identify as challenges that state and local human services agencies face in balancing privacy protections with sharing data?

3. What actions do stakeholders suggest the federal government take to address identified challenges?

Background: wide array of programs

GAO-11-531T: *Human Service Program: Opportunities to Reduce Inefficiencies*

Figure 1: Illustrative Human Services Programs and Tax Expenditures



Source: GAO analysis of agency documents.

Background: Benefits of Data Sharing

Key functional areas	Examples
Eligibility and enrollment	Use existing data sources to gather client information and reduce client need to provide documentation to multiple agencies
Case management	Provide caseworkers with updated information (e.g. addresses and household composition) to facilitate contact of clients
Program oversight and accountability	Conduct data matching inquiries to identify program integrity issues
Research and evaluation	Use administrative program information to supplement or replace data gathered through other ways (e.g. surveys)

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Background: various privacy requirements

- Human service agencies obtain much personal information that needs to properly protected
- Federal laws and regulations establish privacy protections
  - generally (e.g. Privacy Act)
  - specific types of information (e.g. FERPA, HIPAA)
  - program statutes may restrict data sharing (e.g. TANF law includes provision on use/disclosure of information)
- States have own laws and policies

Data sharing in selected sites

Eligibility

- Michigan
- Utah

Case management:

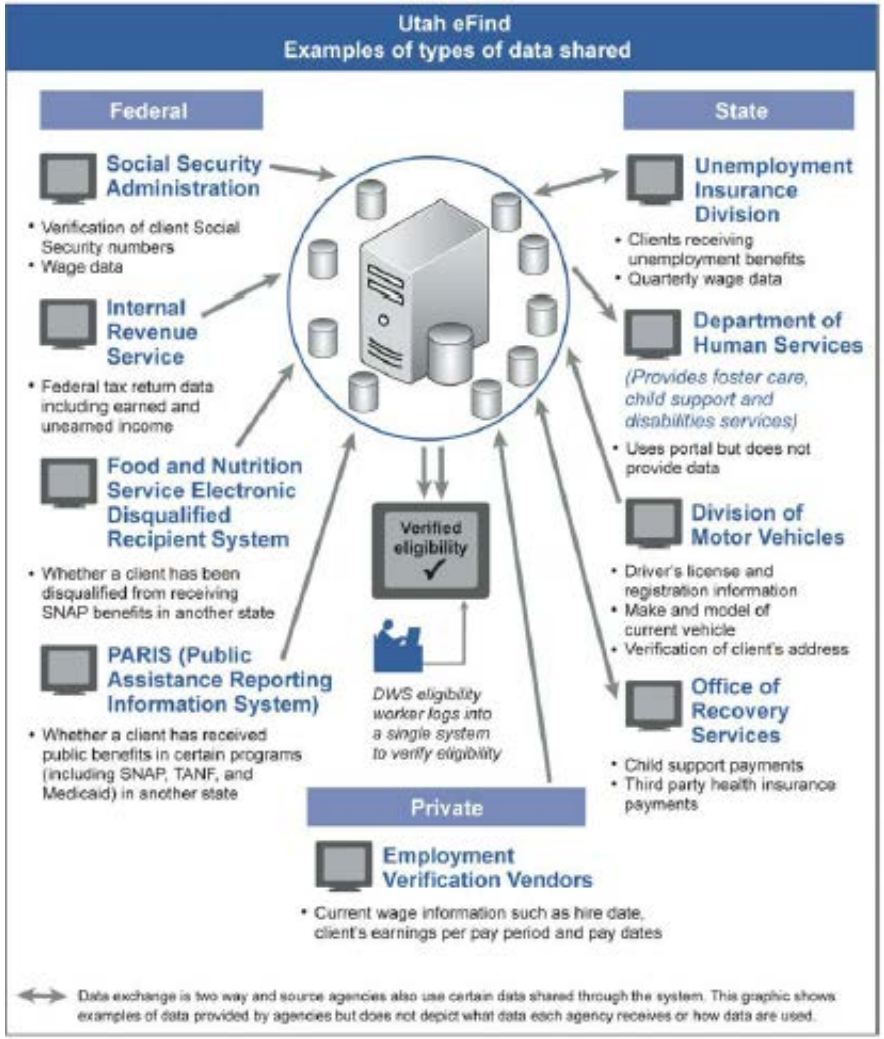
- Allegheny Co. (PA)
- New York City

Common aspects

- Central repository or portal
- Interface with external sources
- Common identifier
- Role-based access
- Data sharing agreements

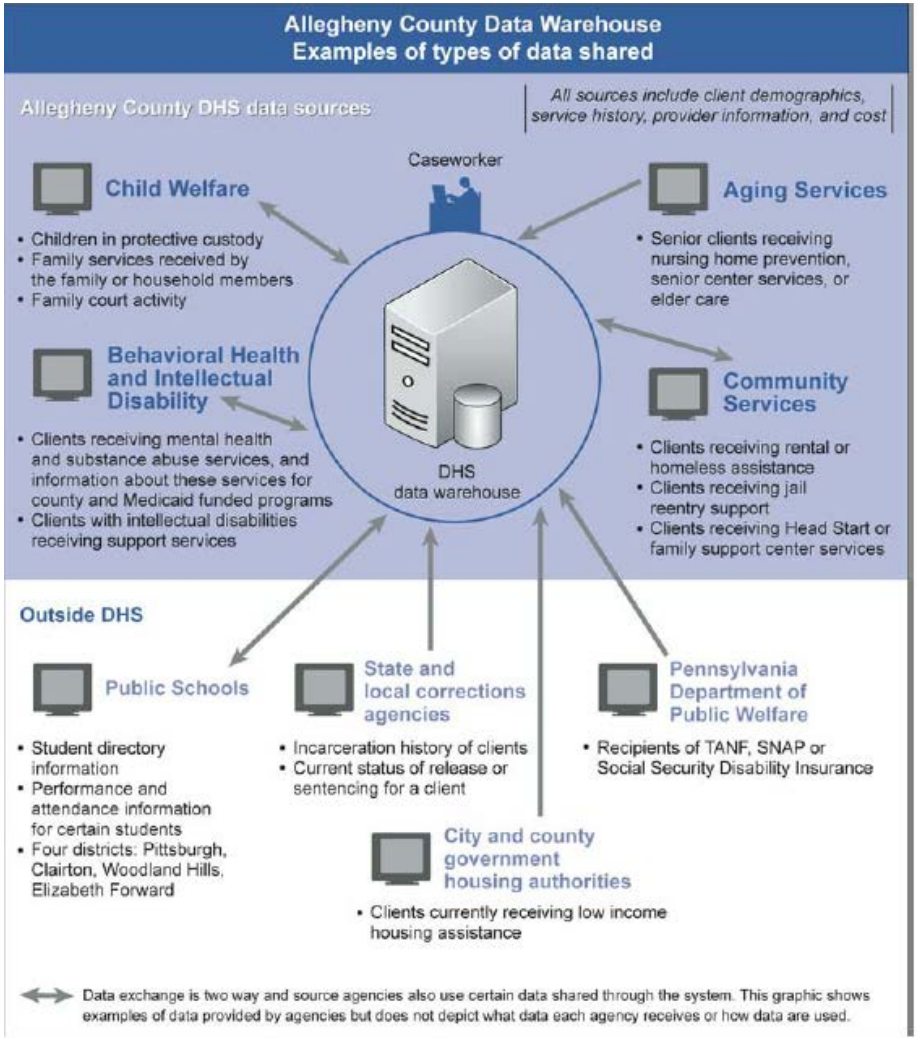
Examples from selected sites: Utah

- eFind (eligibility system)
  - Interfaced with over 20 federal, state, and local databases to verify information
  - Vital records, wage data, DMV, others
  - Reduce client burden and administrative processing time and improved program integrity



Examples from selected sites: Allegheny

- Data Warehouse
  - Access data from within and outside human services department
  - More timely access to family information (e.g. who else in the household)
  - Easier access to school performance and attendance information for certain students



Some common success factors

- Strong leadership and support
- Organizational structure
- Financial support or seed funding
- Legal review and analysis

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Challenges and potential federal actions

- Two-part survey ("Delphi") of 35 stakeholders from:
  - state and local human service agencies
  - private and non-profit sector IT providers
  - advocacy and research organizations

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Stakeholder reported challenges

- **Related to federal privacy requirements**
  - Confusion or misperceptions around what agencies are allowed to share
  - Agencies may be overly cautious in interpreting requirements
  - Requirements may be inconsistent across programs

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Stakeholder reported challenges

- **Organizational and implementation**:
  - Outdated technology systems may not be able to share data securely
  - Data sharing agreements may be cumbersome to establish
  - A mindset that agencies should not share data

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Stakeholder suggested actions

- **Guidance and models**:
  - Coordinated multi-agency guidance that clarifies what data sharing is permissible
  - Model data sharing agreements that comply with federal privacy requirements
  - Funds for pilots and demonstration projects

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Stakeholder suggested actions

- **Re-examining federal privacy requirements**:
  - Review and harmonize non-statutory requirements to ensure more standardized privacy rules across programs
  - Review rules to ensure appropriate for current technologies
  - Revise federal law that limited access to education records to facilitate child welfare workers' responsibilities

Information in this presentation is based on GAO-13-106, *Human Services: Sustained and Coordinated Efforts Could Facilitate Data Sharing While Protecting Privacy.*

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