

# How One HHS Agency is Modernizing Through Challenging Times

The U.S. Virgin Islands leverages a Project Management Office to advance its Integrated Eligibility System project.

Like many health and human services (HHS) agencies across the country, the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS) has operated with legacy systems built on aging technology and manual processes that have evolved over many years as program requirements have changed.

In 2015, DHS launched the Virgin Islands Benefit Eligibility System (VIBES) project to modernize its HHS eligibility and enrollment systems. The new integrated system improves service

levels, streamlines application processes and increases digital access to services. The first phase of the VIBES project encompassed Medicaid eligibility and enrollment functions and was completed in two years.

## Weathering the Storms

In September 2017, as the next phase of the VIBES project was in its early stages, hurricanes Irma and Maria hit the islands. The two unprecedented Category 5 storms had a devastating impact on the territory's infrastructure. The VIBES project came to a

halt as DHS pivoted to deliver emergency support services.

The hurricanes' impact on HHS operations lingered for years. At the same time, the storms demonstrated the need for greater systems capabilities in anticipation of future crises. The disruption of services caused by the hurricanes, coupled with the historic claim volume and growing demands from the COVID pandemic, accelerated plans for DHS system modernization.

## A Dedicated PMO is Essential

When external circumstances disrupt a major project like VIBES, it can be difficult to rebuild momentum. Outlining a strategy, establishing a budget and mobilizing a team are challenging and time-consuming tasks. To restart VIBES and push ahead on modernization, DHS invested in dedicated project management and a durable structure that would drive continuous progress and productivity — and maintain momentum in the face of future challenges.

DHS contracted with CSG Government Solutions to provide ongoing project management, leadership and technical expertise through an enterprisewide Project Management Office (PMO).

“We brought on a dedicated project management organization that provides expertise and continuity while reducing the burden on busy DHS operational staff,” says Gary Smith, the territory's Medicaid

## Understanding the USVI

As a U.S. territory, the Virgin Islands (USVI) supports the well-being of its population with HHS programs including Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), childcare and others.

Although USVI has a relatively small population, its HHS programs and systems share the same underlying complexity as those in other states and territories. In addition, USVI is impacted by unique demographic and geographic factors, including:

- A large proportion of residents depend on HHS programs.
- Weather events can have a major impact on public health and the local economy.
- The islands have inherent transportation obstacles.

These characteristics intensify the need for a modernized integrated eligibility system that is accessible, efficient and reliable.



Director. “CSG has strengthened our capacity for sustained progress on VIBES initiatives, as well as with the Public Health Emergency unwind, by providing a PMO with a broad range of capabilities.”

CSG’s first order of business was facilitating and documenting a consensus on project goals, objectives and desired outcomes. Establishing a project foundation with clear, thorough, well-documented governance authorities, processes and methods pays big dividends for the entire life of a project.

“The PMO provided a stable structure that allowed DHS staff to efficiently prioritize and contribute their policy and program expertise to launching the VIBES project, while minimizing disruption to their important day-to-day responsibilities,” says Smith.

CSG’s PMO brings high value to the DHS leadership team by:

- Providing **consistent insight** into project performance
- Helping DHS **make timely and forward-looking decisions** based on CSG’s knowledge of common problems that arise on integrated eligibility projects in other states
- Enabling leaders to **understand potential downstream impacts** of alternatives
- Establishing a **process for meaningful communication** and consideration of risks to the project schedule, scope and budget

“We operate PMOs on many complex modernization projects across the U.S.,” says Michael Collisi, national practice lead in CSG’s Healthcare and Human Services Practice. “These multiyear efforts always take a lot of twists and turns over the life of the project. Establishing an experienced PMO upfront keeps DHS ahead of the game.”

### Focusing on the Future

The modular design of modern integrated eligibility systems necessitates the coordinated effort of multiple systems vendors and other contractors to build components of the overall system. Each component requires coordination of business and technical requirements, integration between the modules, alignment of service levels for the system vendors, and coordination of the business processes. This helps avoid any uncertainty over the responsibilities of each vendor’s work.

To date, the VIBES PMO has facilitated the alignment of policy, operations and systems functions to improve the overall eligibility and enrollment process for Medicaid, including the renewal process that is essential to the COVID Public Health Emergency unwind. In addition, the PMO has managed the integration between VIBES eligibility and a new Pharmacy Benefits Management system. The VIBES PMO has also facilitated updates to USVI SNAP policy and

processes, identifying changes that must be incorporated into the design of VIBES in anticipation of the integration of the SNAP program.

In the near term, USVI and the CSG PMO are making progress on important initiatives and features that improve services for the territory’s residents today, including:

- Electronic Medicaid and SNAP enrollment forms
- A text message-based public information reminder campaign for residents to reapply for benefits as part of their COVID Public Health Emergency unwind efforts
- Training for caseworkers on updated eligibility policies
- Automated federal Medicaid reporting functions
- Implementation of a new pharmacy benefits management interface

“Modernizing DHS technology systems advances our vision of empowering individuals and families towards self-sufficiency through the efficient delivery of high-value services,” says Smith, the USVI Medicaid Director. “A successful VIBES project has a direct impact on the lives of the people of the Virgin Islands.”

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