



KANSAS CHOOSES CLOUD TO PUT CITIZEN SERVICES FIRST

The state's new integrated eligibility cloud environment ensures its most vulnerable get the help they need.



When the COVID-19 pandemic sparked an economic crisis, it generated an extraordinary demand for social services like food assistance, childcare assistance and Medicaid. In response, the federal government passed the emergency Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which gave states authority to expand Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to eligible citizens and to be more creative in how they support family and childcare provider needs. While the increased assistance was welcomed by families in need, adjusting to the change created challenges for many states. From a technology perspective, it meant reconfiguring the legacy IT systems many states rely on to manage SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and childcare assistance.

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For Kansas IT decision-makers, making the adjustment was simple. The state recently migrated its integrated eligibility system to a cloud-based architecture. Because the new architecture provides the flexibility and scalability the state needs to react to new federal mandates, Kansas Health and Human Services (HHS) leaders issued an additional \$11 million in SNAP benefits to approximately 60,000 citizens over the course of one night. Kansas was also able to re-open the LIHEAP season and issue mass supplemental childcare assistance benefits to families impacted by changes to school structure.

The Road to Modernization

In Kansas, health and human services are managed by two agencies: the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, which handles medical-related benefits such as Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and the Department for Children and Families, which handles food, cash, energy and childcare assistance.

Years ago, Kansas leaders realized the legacy infrastructure supporting both agencies was failing. The physical IT infrastructure was no longer supported by its respective manufacturers. Upgrading operating systems to support constantly changing security requirements

was becoming more difficult. Scaling to support a growing number of citizens in need was nearly impossible. State leaders needed a new infrastructure solution to help them meet federal and state requirements aligned to citizen services and benefits such as health care, food assistance, childcare assistance and employment services. They also needed a system that was scalable and would allow them to integrate HHS to better serve citizens.

To address these challenges, Kansas leaders engaged Accenture, which was already supporting its integrated eligibility system called the Kansas Eligibility Enforcement System (KEES). As part of a process to modernize and improve operations, the state moved away from private cloud and shifted operations to the public cloud.

“We knew the infrastructure we were running KEES on needed to be replaced so we embarked on identifying a solution before it became a problem,” says Glen Yancey, chief information officer for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. “Working with Accenture, we tested a technology solution leveraging cloud and proved that the Oracle Cloud could be a long-term solution for us.”

The state eventually settled on a hybrid approach leveraging Oracle Government Cloud, Oracle Cloud Infrastructure (OCI) and Oracle Exadata to support KEES.

Meeting Government Standards

As the state began to transition KEES, it became clear the three-way partnership between Accenture, Oracle and the state would be critical to success.

“There are always challenges with a big HHS IT implementation. It’s how the team pulls together to resolve them that makes a difference,” says Elizabeth Wolff, enterprise systems director for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. “I’m incredibly proud of the team — especially the state workers — and the endless hours they put into the project to learn new technologies and make it successful.”

Use of Oracle Government Cloud allowed Accenture to refresh and improve the security posture of KEES by running in a Minimum Acceptable Risk Standards for Exchanges (MARS-E) 2.0 environment and leveraging Oracle’s FedRAMP-ready infrastructure and third-party solutions like Fortinet and MegaPort.

“States can’t just ask a cloud provider to be FedRAMP ready, they also need to ensure their application is appropriately certified

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and protected through application design, access controls and separation of duties,” says Raymond Han, managing director at Accenture. “States need a vendor that can help them do that, because it’s not just FedRAMP, it’s a combination of things that drives success. The rules and the threats change every day. You have to have a flexible infrastructure so you can constantly adjust your security posture.”

A Three-Day Cloud Migration

KEES on Oracle Cloud went live over a three-day holiday weekend in January 2020. A quick migration was critical to ensure as little disruption as possible.

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A fast migration was also critical for state HHS employees, because the longer the system was down the bigger their backlogs would grow.

“By keeping the system implementation and transition time low, we reduced the snowball effect of workload for the state employees,” says Han.

Yancey notes, “This was the smoothest technology transition that I have seen in my career.”

As the new KEES cloud architecture rolled out, the state saw immediate performance improvements. Going forward, the state also expects to see substantial annual cost savings due to the elimination or reduction of licensing fees, patching costs and hardware expenditures.

Perhaps most importantly, the new cloud architecture provides the state with more dynamic and responsive services, and it didn’t take long for those benefits to be put to the test. When the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a state lockdown and high numbers of job losses shortly after the new infrastructure launched, the state saw a dramatic rise in food, cash and medical assistance applications.

“The ability of cloud to scale to support the needs of citizens is critically important,” says Han. “When COVID-19 hit and activity on the state’s website spiked, the new system didn’t skip a beat. The state now has the flexibility, scalability and computing power it needs to adjust to unexpected circumstances and serve citizens faster.”

“Program managers have high expectations for their IT departments and vendors,” says Sandra Kimmons, director of Economic and Employment Services, Kansas Department for Children and Families. “They expect changes to occur quickly and accurately to respond to public needs. As changes and new program requirements came from FNS (Food and Nutrition Services) around Pandemic EBT and other programs, KEES allowed the state to react and respond to those changes very quickly.”

That flexibility and scalability will continue to be critical as COVID-19 prompts additional changes and new federal mandates.

“Implementation of KEES on Oracle Cloud means the state can manage increased volumes and new programs that weren’t even on the horizon four weeks ago,” says Han.

Balancing Risk and Reward

Today, KEES serves more than 400,000 Kansans annually, and that number is likely to rise in the wake of COVID-19. For Kansas, the timing was fortuitous. KEES will allow the state to adjust and scale as citizen needs change and enable citizens to benefit from a more integrated health and human services system.

KEES was also a lesson in balancing risk and reward.

“Risk is the ultimate decider for a lot of state agencies,” says Han. “Kansas had a variety of options when this all started. The simplest and least risky solution would have been to go back to a converged infrastructure solution and buy more hardware.”

But because Kansas HHS leaders took a long-range view, the state is now benefitting from a new infrastructure faster than anticipated.

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“State leaders thought they would see the rewards of the new cloud-based integrated eligibility system in a year,” says Han. “They ended up seeing rewards in two or three months.”

Meanwhile, the three-way partnership between the state, Accenture and Oracle continues to flourish post-implementation.

“We continue to collaborate and adopt new technologies to improve KEES,” says Lee A. Norman, MD, secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. “The partnership with Accenture has been critical to helping us find a sweet spot of technology implementation, business improvement and improved outcomes we’re all striving for.”

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