



Ally-IL

Guiding Children to the Summit

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services: Innovation at the Intersection of Child Welfare Technology and Human Connection

Illinois Department of
DCFS
Children & Family Services

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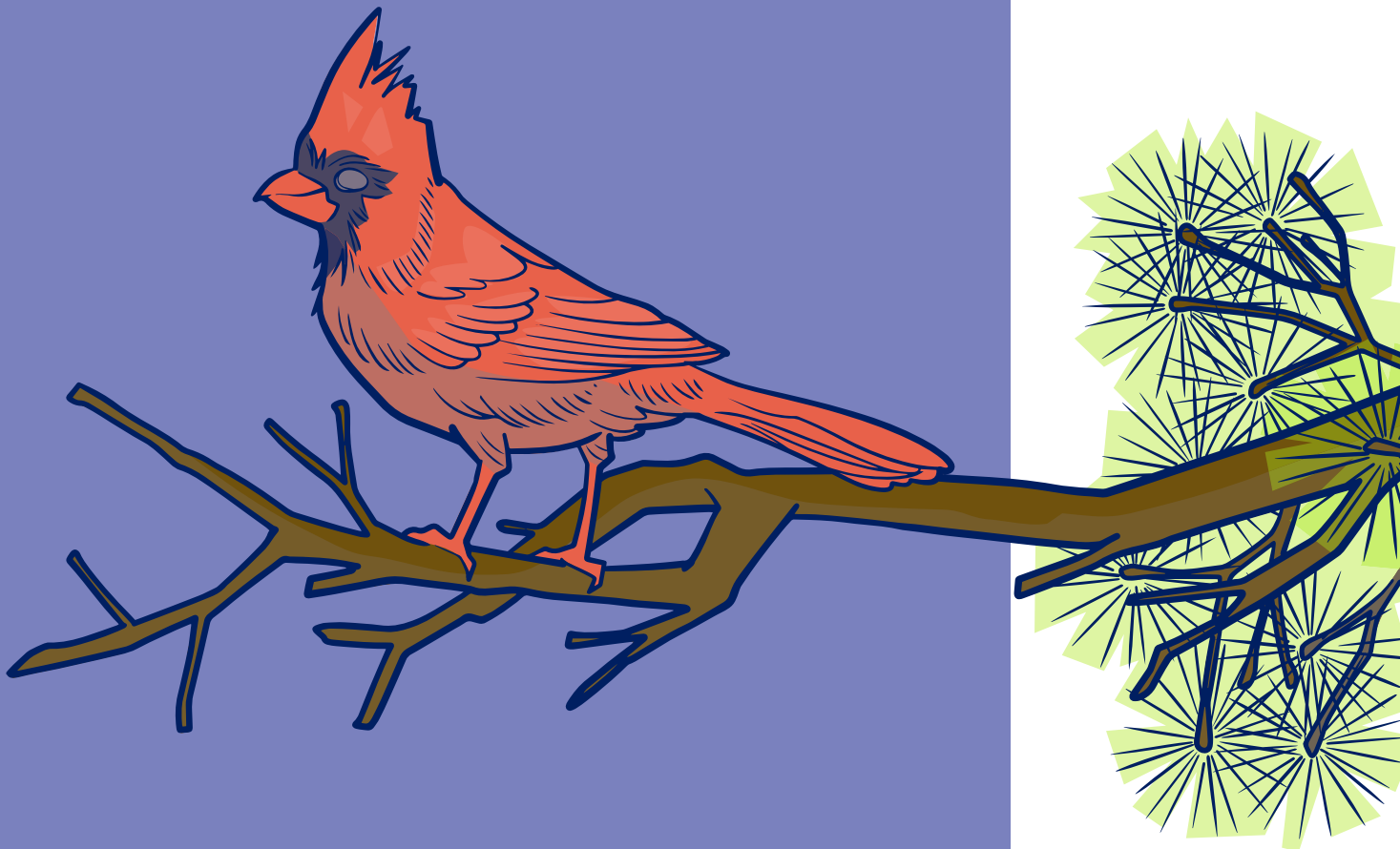
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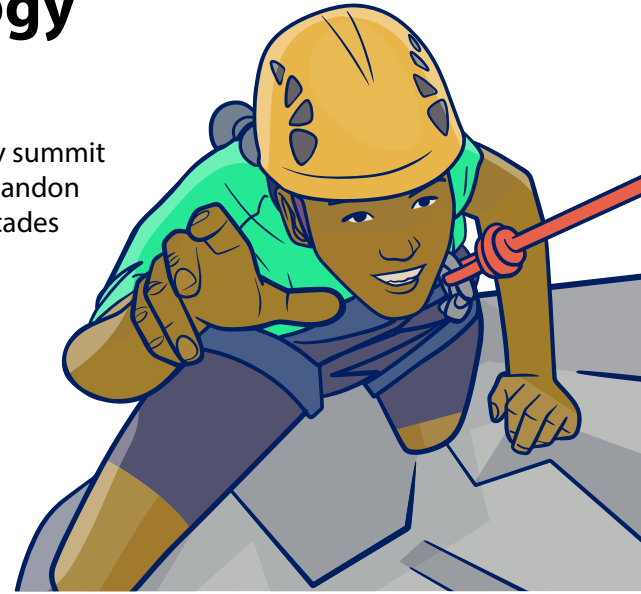
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The Intersection of Technology and Community

In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary became the first person to successfully summit Mt. Everest. In the decades prior, many tried but were forced to abandon their goal, leaving the great mountain behind in defeat. In the decades since Sir Hillary's achievement, more than 6,000 individuals have summited the world's highest point.

Though successful summits had increased steadily over time, they have boomed in the last 30 years. Researchers attribute the increase to several factors, such as improved weather forecasting, fixed climbing lines and increased experience of expedition leaders and sherpas, the Himalayan guides renowned for their mountaineering skills. In fact, over half of the 700 summits in 2022 were completed by sherpas. Their knowledge and experience are crucial to a successful climb.¹



While Sir Edmund Hillary received worldwide acclaim for being the first to summit, he was accompanied by his climbing partner Tenzig Norgay, a Nepali Indian sherpa whose name has been largely omitted from popular memory. In fact, climbers like Hillary could not have reached the summit without the support and guidance of the sherpas whose mission is to protect the safety and well-being of their guests in their attempts to climb the enormous mountain.

The combination of technological advances and highly trained individuals directly contributed to doubling successful summits in the last half century. Similarly, some professions have advanced, embracing trends, technology and other tools, while others have struggled to stay relevant. In child welfare, too often specialists are tasked with guiding children and families to the "summit" with outdated technology. Caseworkers and their colleagues hold a wealth of knowledge, but simple tasks can be unnecessarily difficult and time consuming when using inadequate tools.

To stay relevant and facilitate improved outcomes for children and families, the child welfare community can facilitate improved outcomes between employees and families using state of the art technology. By bridging the gap between the human elements of casework and the technological advancements of instant communication, children, caregivers and a supportive virtual team are united, at the touch of a button, with a community's worth of knowledge.

¹ "Everest 2022 Season Summary: The Year of the Missing Jetstream | the Blog on alanarnette.com." The Blog on alanarnette.com, 29 May 2022, <http://www.alanarnette.com/blog/2022/05/28/everest-2022-season-summary-the-year-of-the-missing-jetstream/>

Technology in Child Welfare Today

Caseworkers dedicate themselves to the challenging work of helping vulnerable children and families overcome intense and traumatic experiences. They are committed to the children and families and understand how critical it is that every child has an ally. **All day. Every day.**

When asked to describe the best part of their work, a focus group of child welfare specialists and supervisors provided answers indicative of their dedication:

“
*I love working with
parents and children.*
”

“
*Working with
people and finding
solutions to
problems.*
”

“
*My favorite part of
my job is the kids I
am able to reunify.*
”

While caseworkers try to devote most of their time, energy and resources to children and families, they also find themselves spending an inordinate amount of time grappling with out-of-date processes, filling out paper forms and making dozens of phone calls to reach the critical parties associated with a case. Caseworkers are often asked to build and maintain a network of supports for each of the children in their caseload often without access to advancements that are otherwise taken for granted in other sectors; technologies that improve collaboration, provide real-time reporting updates, decentralize teams and improve efficiency. Without these tools, caseworkers face barriers to communication and to efficient work. More than 50% of caseworkers and supervisors surveyed in this assessment reported difficulties getting in touch with members of their care teams in a timely manner.²





In some states, agencies that serve children and families have implemented technologies that help caseworkers manage efficiencies while providing and improving client access to resources. The State of Arizona uses specialized software for field workers and has provided tablets for case managers and investigators. And in Illinois, the secure ASK Mobile app allows caseworkers and investigators to capture and upload photos, document notes and retrieve important data while working in the field. These technologies can help reduce strain on the caseworker and make the entire system run more efficiently, melding high-quality human work with support from advanced technology.

There are countless ways technology can benefit the case management process for child welfare staff, children and families. Advanced tools can make it easier to process cases, help ensure a field worker's safety and can even help create a sense of community.

When building a care team, child welfare specialists are tasked with identifying and creating a support network around a child and family. While staff with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) are experts in their field, children also require the support of a network that includes engaged parents/caretakers, teachers, counselors, medical professionals, friends and a host of other positive individuals. When and where appropriate, it is the role of the caseworker to create space for each of these voices to be heard, keep individuals informed and rally consistent support and engagement to facilitate the best possible outcomes for each child. Connection with and engagement from other members of the care team, in combination with the child welfare specialist, are crucial to creating a community for each child. The use of effective technology makes it easy to connect and bring the team's knowledge together to benefit children and families.

How Illinois is Advancing Child Welfare Technology

Illinois DCFS understands that there are opportunities to upgrade the child welfare specialist's toolbox. Caseworkers and supervisors need better access to parents, caregivers, teachers and the other individuals important to a case. They need to communicate faster and more efficiently, using secure methods, and to have avenues to foster human connection and trust among case participants. Illinois DCFS is addressing this issue by introducing a new communication and collaboration technology: **Ally-IL**.



Ally-IL is an innovative strategy, built on Microsoft Teams, to improve communication and collaboration for everyone involved in a case. The Ally-IL solution allows selected individuals to communicate easily and securely once an Ally-IL team is created by the case manager. The case manager is also able to create channels (groups within a team organized by topic) and chats (messages between two individuals or in larger groups) to facilitate conversation in the team.

Instead of a series of phone calls, a caseworker can communicate with the entire team with one chat message and receive replies from anyone in the chat. Ally-IL Team members can send photos, documents and ask questions to the entire group or in smaller chats. Ally-IL allows children and families to connect virtually, within a single platform, with their professional and personal supports. The Ally-IL Team promotes the development of stronger relationships within the team which can lead to increased engagement in services. Ally-IL also acts as a record-keeper, allowing team members to review information and provide caseworkers and supervisors with a record of conversations.



Ally-IL is like a long-range walkie-talkie on the climb up Everest: keeping climbers and sherpas and the ground crew in contact so they are alerted to emergencies and can share progress and crucial updates throughout their journey.

Illinois DCFS has piloted Ally-IL with a subset of intact and permanency staff for more than 18 months and then sought the experience of Deloitte's Assessment Team to analyze the results. Anecdotal evidence from pilot participants shows the value of Ally-IL as a communication and collaboration tool:

“
We are able to come together on cases and other issues. [It's] easier to get connected with one another.
”

– Caseworker,
 Southern Region

“
I am able to see the attempts that the families have made to communicate through Ally-IL. If everyone uses [Ally], it is more efficient.
”

– Supervisor, Cook Region

“
Ally-IL has made communication transparent.
”

– Caseworker,
 Southern Region

“
We can have foster parents and parents connect using Ally-IL without needing the caseworker present.
”

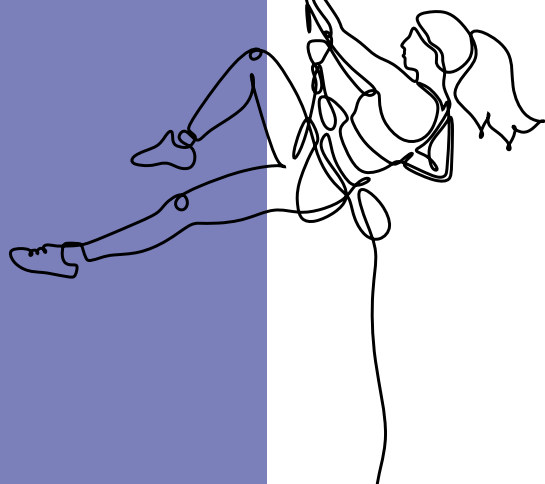
– Caseworker,
 Southern Region

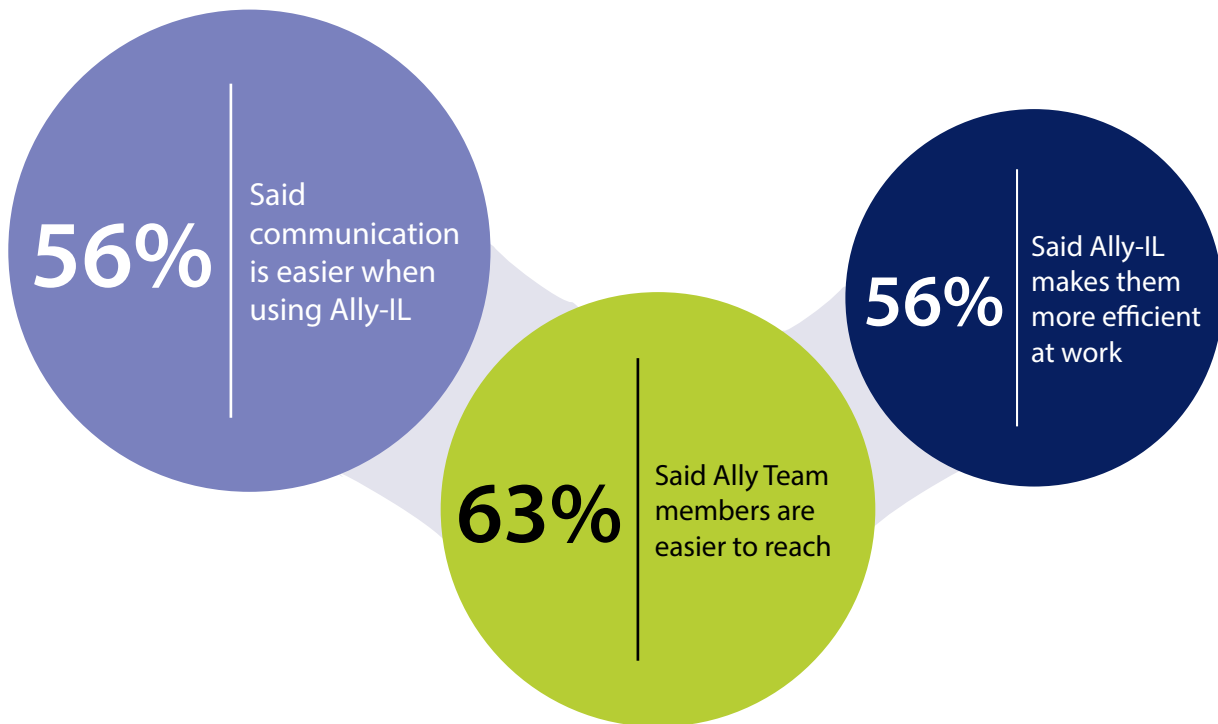
“
As a supervisor, I am often removed from communication between family/[foster parents]/worker, and Ally-IL has allowed for easier interaction. I can stress/follow up with clients on what their workers are sharing and also be a cheerleader to clients - which was not as easy to do prior to Ally-IL.
”

– Supervisor, Southern Region

While the process of adopting a new tool and forming new communication habits takes time and intention, this 18-month pilot has shown that once Ally-IL is adopted, team members find that it is easier to reach each other (63%), communication is easier (56%) and their work is more efficient (56%).

Data collected by Ally-IL has been used by Illinois DCFS to create dashboards that display key engagement and performance data. Caseworkers and supervisors can log on and check weekly status, easily examine the overall Ally-IL team engagement and view upcoming Teams meetings. They can also filter by case and drill down on how Ally team members are using the tool to understand the flow of communication and overall engagement.





The assessment findings show that Ally-IL can be a cornerstone of the case management process in the future across the United States. Illinois DCFS has successfully piloted this program and forecasts immense benefits to the rest of its thousands of caseworkers, supervisors, families and children when the statewide rollout is completed. An Ally-IL team is a much more robust approach to communication and collaboration than on-off text messages. Communications in Ally-IL Teams provide additional visibility to the supervisor and other critical team members that text messages can't provide. Ally-IL is the technological hinge between a community of caring individuals and dedicated child welfare specialists, allowing everyone to gather in one place, to connect in real time with ease and efficiency, for the good of the children.



Conclusion

Achieving great outcomes often requires a combination of surrounding yourself with the best people and the best technology. Child welfare specialists work selflessly to facilitate the best outcomes for children and families. By providing a secure communication platform for child welfare specialists to build virtual teams around their children and families and create easy connections to positive supports, Illinois DCFS and agencies like it facilitate trust, collaboration and knowledge sharing to benefit every child and family, enabling them to summit their very own mountaintop.



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About Illinois DCFS

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to reports received by the Child Abuse Hotline at childabuse.illinois.gov (non-emergency situations) or 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. In the event a child must be removed from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible (less than 4% of the time), DCFS is committed to pursuing guardianship and fictive kin as primary options.



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