

CHFA (CT) Testing the Boundaries of Rapid Implementation

Connecticut Housing Finance Authority
Management Innovation: Technology

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Testing the Boundaries of Rapid Implementation

Introduction

In June 2020, the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority (CHFA) was called upon to assist its sister agency, the Connecticut Department of Housing, with the rapid implementation of a rental assistance program funded by the CARES Act of 2020. As DOH had no IT development capacity, the agency sought CHFA's help in creating an IT system to support the administration of the program. With only three weeks until the scheduled start of the program, CHFA's IT Department was tasked with creating and deploying a system that would be able to provide a means of processing thousands of applications from tenants, assigning them to eligibility reviews, data processing, data consistency checks, payment file generation, communication and reporting. The challenges at the start included not only a lack of time to create a new system, but also a lack of clarity regarding the scope of the project, a lack of resources, an inability to implement new products or systems as well as other competing, operational stresses on the IT Department during the pandemic. A standard course of developing the software for the new program was not an option.

In the end, CHFA was able to develop a system quickly within the three-week timeframe, with a careful design of a universal dataset that focused on simplicity, scalability, and end-to-end visibility of the application. The IT Team was able to leverage existing tools and resources as well as partnerships to support a successful launch and administration of the rental assistance program. Over the course of six months, the program processed more than 23,000 initial applications, qualifying almost 15,000 applicants and approving almost 12,000 applicants for assistance and delivering more than \$23 million for the benefit of residents in dire need of rental assistance during the pandemic.

Project Approach

From the start, CHFA recognized that this was a much different IT project, requiring innovative thinking to deliver a system within a short timeframe that could handle the processing of thousands of applications. The standard approach of Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) was not an option given the time constraints. Instead, CHFA approached the project with more of an Extreme Programming methodology (XP) where the XP principles of simplicity, communication, rapid feedback, incremental changes and courage played major roles. The XP approach lent itself to assisting an effort that was fraught with challenges from the very beginning, including a lack of clarity regarding the project scope, a constantly evolving scope, lack of resources and continuous integration.

In the end, CHFA staff built a system that met the challenges of the new program. The success of the system can be attributed to painstaking attention to the design of a "universal dataset" that focused on simplicity, scalability and end-to-end visibility of an application. CHFA's IT Team began the design with a recognition that the project was complex and that the functional details were unknown for the processing stages. Despite that initial challenge, the team was able to break the project down by clearly defining the high-level stages of the process. They began to develop the universal dataset

based on key factors, grouping provider and consumer groups across the following stages: intake, validation, prequalification, assignment, process, approval and payment. Simple and self-explanatory information was included for each stage, making it straightforward for both the provider and the consumer.

The construct of a universal dataset produced a number of advantages for program administration along the way. First, the dataset was highly scalable, accommodating rapid scope changes to the programs that occurred in respond to consumer or operational needs over several months. It also provided end-to-end visibility by establishing a single stream of data broken down by stages. Through dataset mapping to the internal database, it provide an efficient mechanism for analysis and reporting.

As part of the design, CHFA's IT team used available resources to support the administration of the program. Staff rapidly developed a number of forms and tapped known processes to support the program, including Excel intake Forms, web forms, website enhancements, mass mailing relay services, VB scripting, Excel with integrated Macros, Crystals Reports, Citrix ShareFile and User Access /Network setup functions. From form development to documentation to communication, CHFA leveraged existing resources to great effect.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, CHFA's design supported several, key partnerships that together employed the system to assist thousands of applicants. The partners included the DOH administrators, Call Center staff, thirteen housing counseling agencies and CHFA processing teams who worked together to communicate information, collect and process information, and ultimately provide financial relief to Connecticut residents in need.

Impact of Project

To be sure, CHFA's implementation of a system to assist the state rental assistance program TRHAP is not a textbook case for deployment of an IT system, but it is a model and success story for agencies to follow when facing a rapid deployment challenge, and standard development methodologies cannot be employed.

CHFA's approach, using a universal dataset, allows both simplicity and rapid scalability in an IT project that carries the expectation of a high volume of applications, evolving program requirements and quick turnarounds. Without access to new programs or products, the team was able to rely on available tools and resources already available to the team to create a strong and reliable program to support the state's rental assistance program.

For CHFA, the IT Team's effort is an embodiment of values articulated in CHFA's Strategic Plan. They are tenets that celebrate:

Commitment to Opportunity: *We work with our partners to respond to the deep disparities in access to quality of life. We use our investments to create the opportunity for all households to have a safe and affordable home wherever they want to live.*

Grounded in Communication: *We believe that effective communication with our partners and*

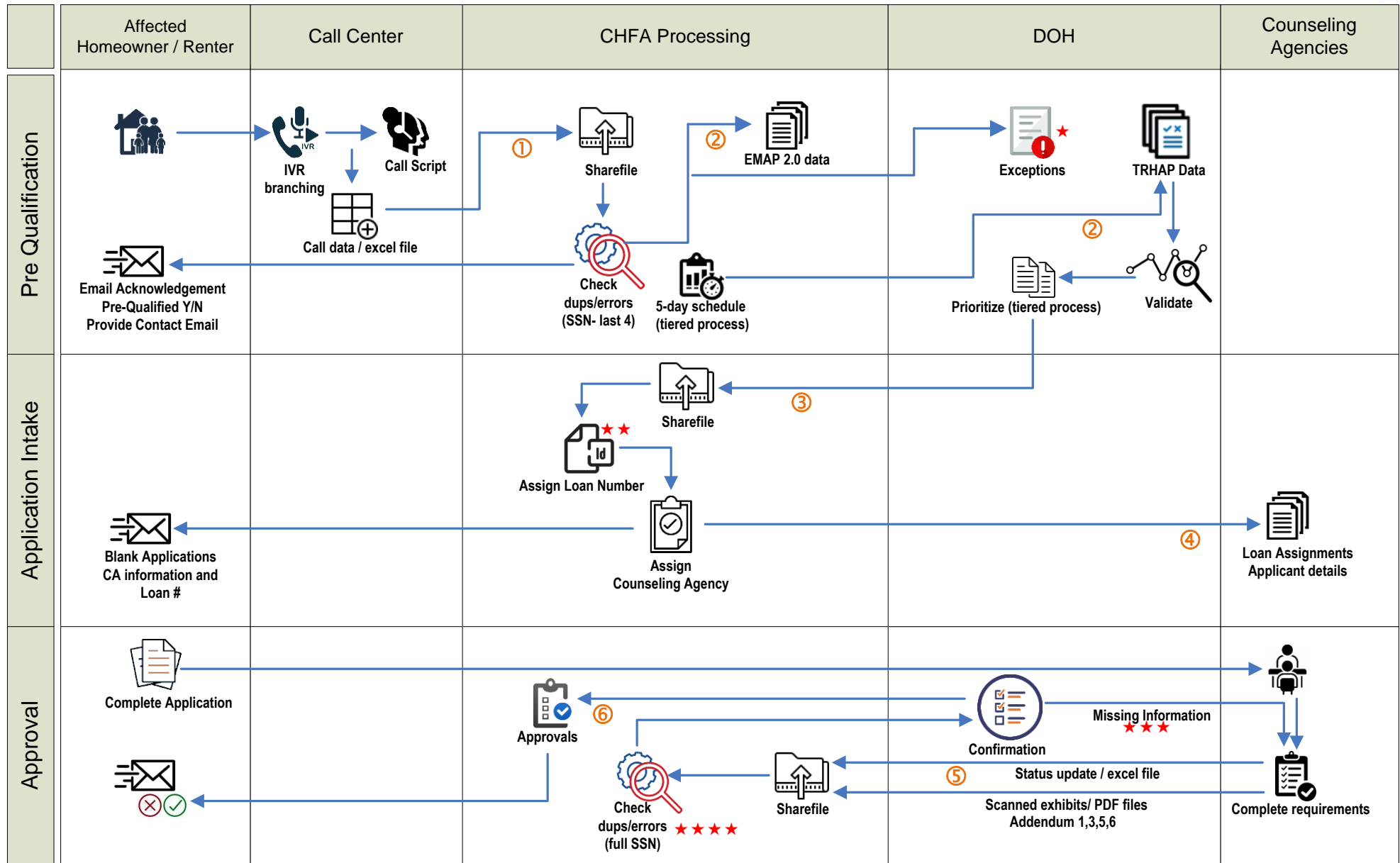
customers is a key to our success.

Empowered by Ownership: *We take ownership for the quality of our individual work, but also take pride in what we deliver as a team; our focus is on a successful outcome for all. We proactively turn challenges into opportunities.*

The CHFA IT Team staff turned the challenge of a rapid deployment of the state's temporary rental assistance program into an opportunity for the all, including partner agencies, their staff and the residents of Connecticut.

Temporary Housing Assistance Program – Process

- WORKING DRAFT -



★ Exceptions will include requests that are incomplete, without an email, duplicates, unable to prequalify and incorrectly marked eligible or ineligible by call center etc.

★★ Loan Number assigned to qualified requests with an assigned Counseling Agency

★★★ DOH communicates with CA on missing/incomplete exhibits

★★★★ Applications are verified again and any duplication is checked against full SSN provided by CA (file uploaded)

①②③④⑤⑥ Data file (excel) uploads from CHFA or to CHFA