

NINA MOINI: Starting today, Minnesota's counties can start a long, and some say overdue, makeover of the technological systems and online databases that keep the many services they provide running. The state legislature approved \$90 million to help sluggish computer systems, some that date back to the 1980s, get a little zippier.

Here to explain how this transformation is going to work and just how big of a deal this modernization is to county workers and those who benefit from these programs is Paul Verrette. He's director of the Minnesota Association of County Social Services Administrators. Thanks for your time today, Paul.

PAUL Thank you. Glad to be here.

VERRETTE:

NINA MOINI: We've consistently heard here on the program from people who work in positions like yours that it's been really overdue to make some upgrades and that everybody can really benefit from this. But I want to start by trying to understand the systems the county has for these social services. They go toward things like SNAP food assistance or general assistance. Could you explain broadly what kinds of computer systems are needed to run programs like those?

PAUL I'd be happy to. So in Minnesota, Minnesota is what's called a state-run, county-administered state. So we work with the state to deliver human services. There are about six large databases behind the benefit services that Minnesotans depend on, and they're, unfortunately, not connected with each other. And the individual databases are cumbersome, inefficient. They haven't been updated in a very long time.

One of the most important ones, MAXIS, which is used for SNAP applications, was actually created in 1989. It uses a programming language called COBOL, which I think only Oregon is the only other state using something like this. And it takes a very long time for our workers to actually enter applications. It can take up to two years to train new staff to be proficient in the systems.

And astonishingly, that system still uses green screens. So when you're working in MAXIS entering someone's benefits, you actually can't use your mouse. You can use it, but not really. And you're looking at a screen that looks like something out of Oregon Trail or an old video game. And so this leads to long application times. It has HR implications. It leads to higher cost for the counties and the state and a number of other bad effects.

NINA MOINI: And I think when people hear this, they may have a hard time believing that some of this critical infrastructure of getting services to people can be this outdated to the point where people are joking about it. How does this do you think benefit people who are waiting for services? It's difficult for staff, we understand, but do you think it has a trickle-down effect?

Obviously, the state has dealt with a lot of fraud. Not saying obviously that anything's going on there, but does this help everybody at the end of the day?

PAUL It certainly does. Once the system is modernized, the immediate impact that a recipient would probably see would be a reduction in application waiting times. And then after that, it would be the ability of your county worker to be able to update you or help you with your benefits. And the way the system works right now, a client would actually go on to a system called MNbenefits. They enter their application online and it looks very modern and they're finished.

And then counties actually have to print those out and then enter them onto the green screen system. And so one of the first things that will be happening that's already been started by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families is a program called Reducing Time to Benefits that will connect those two systems so that they won't have to be hand-entered. And that not only increases efficiency, it also increases accuracy, which is super important right now because of benefits coming from changes from the H.R. 1 legislation in 2025 to Medicaid and to SNAP.

NINA MOINI: You mentioned that some of the current systems take a couple years to train folks in on. So with that in mind, do you think it will take less time to make all of these updates and upgrades you're talking about, or what do you think the timeline might look like?

PAUL VERRETTE: Well, the timeline-- the timeline is actually hard to quantify. One of the reasons is that-- what we're understanding and what this law and other work that state departments and counties have done, one of the products of this is that we're starting to understand and treat technology as infrastructure. And the way I see it is that we need to think of it more as a road system, rather than, say, updating your iPhone or updating the computers in one small office.

And so just like a road system, there will be parts that are easier to install. There are going to be parts that are harder, and there will be more disruption when they're updated. And so with the Time to Benefits project that I mentioned with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, testing for that and then implementation actually starts late 2026.

And then the other six databases, there's still a lot of work to do to figure out what the next replacement is. So it will be a bit of what they call an iterative process. Another way of thinking of it is that one step at a time. But the early steps that are being taken, and then also in the legislation, there is a Human Services Advisory Council and a Legislative Commission on Modernization that involves the counties and the state agencies. Those councils will keep everyone on track. And that, I think, will probably help a lot to get things done more quickly.

Each step, though, each improvement in technology, we hope will lead to another improvement in technology. So, for example, the new legislation has a county-specific bit of money, \$10 million for county projects such as use of AI, use of new interfaces-- in other words, leaving the green screen behind-- and uses of data. And the uses of data don't sound like the most exciting thing to discuss, but they make a huge difference in the service we receive and our ability to steward tax dollars better.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I wonder why, from your vantage point, this upgrade is happening now? Why these funds came through. There's obviously been a really big appetite for change. But when you do look at it like a road infrastructure, it's like you're changing so many things and they're all tied together. Do you think that's why it's taken so long to make some of these upgrades that it's just overwhelming?

PAUL VERRETTE: Yeah. It can't be overwhelming, and that might be why it's taking such a long time. The other reason is that these upgrades will be expensive, but they are the kind of expense that pays off over time. But much like if you're working on something in your house that's going to make your house more energy efficient, you do have to pay the bills up front and then you see those differences over time.

In the same way, we have to make these initial investments, and it might have been very difficult to find the funds to do that. Our state budget and the Human Services budget, in general, it's a very large budget, a lot of expenses. And so it has been hard to find the funds to be able to do this. But we know now that the state government is-- the state government and our legislature, we are all behind this.

This legislation was bipartisan legislation. We had help from so many people and support from so many different corners. And I think really after seeing the demonstrations and then also some of the changes coming from the federal level, which require better systems to reduce administrative burden, those probably all made this the right moment to do it. That and the leadership of some legislators, particularly people like Representative Torkelson and others who really, really championed this.

NINA MOINI: All right, Paul, thanks so much for coming by and telling us about it. We hope you'll come back throughout the process and let us how things are going.

**PAUL
VERRETTE:** We'd love to. We find it terribly exciting, and I'd love to tell you more about it later.

NINA MOINI: Me too. All right. Thanks, Paul. Take care. That's Paul Verrette, director of the Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators.