Role of IT in the Delivery of Social Services: Insights from Joe Vastola, Chief Information Officer, Florida Department of Children and Families

By Michael J. Keegan

The mission of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) is to protect the vulnerable, promote strong and economically self-sufficient families, and advance personal and family recovery and resiliency.

Its vision is that every child in Florida lives in a safe, stable, permanent home nurtured by healthy families and strong communities. Making this vision a reality today involves a host of factors and the support of significant resources. One such resource is the use of a robust information technology infrastructure. IT and technology enable this critical social services department to meet its mission.

What role does IT play in the mission of the Florida DCF? How is DCF changing the way it does IT? Joe Vastola, Chief Information Officer at the Florida Department of Children and Families, joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share his insights on these topics and more. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion.

Would you tell us more about the mission and operations of the Florida Department of Children and Families?

DCF's mission is to work with our local partners and communities to protect the most vulnerable citizens of Florida, promote strong and self-sufficient families, and help advance personal and family recovery and resiliency.
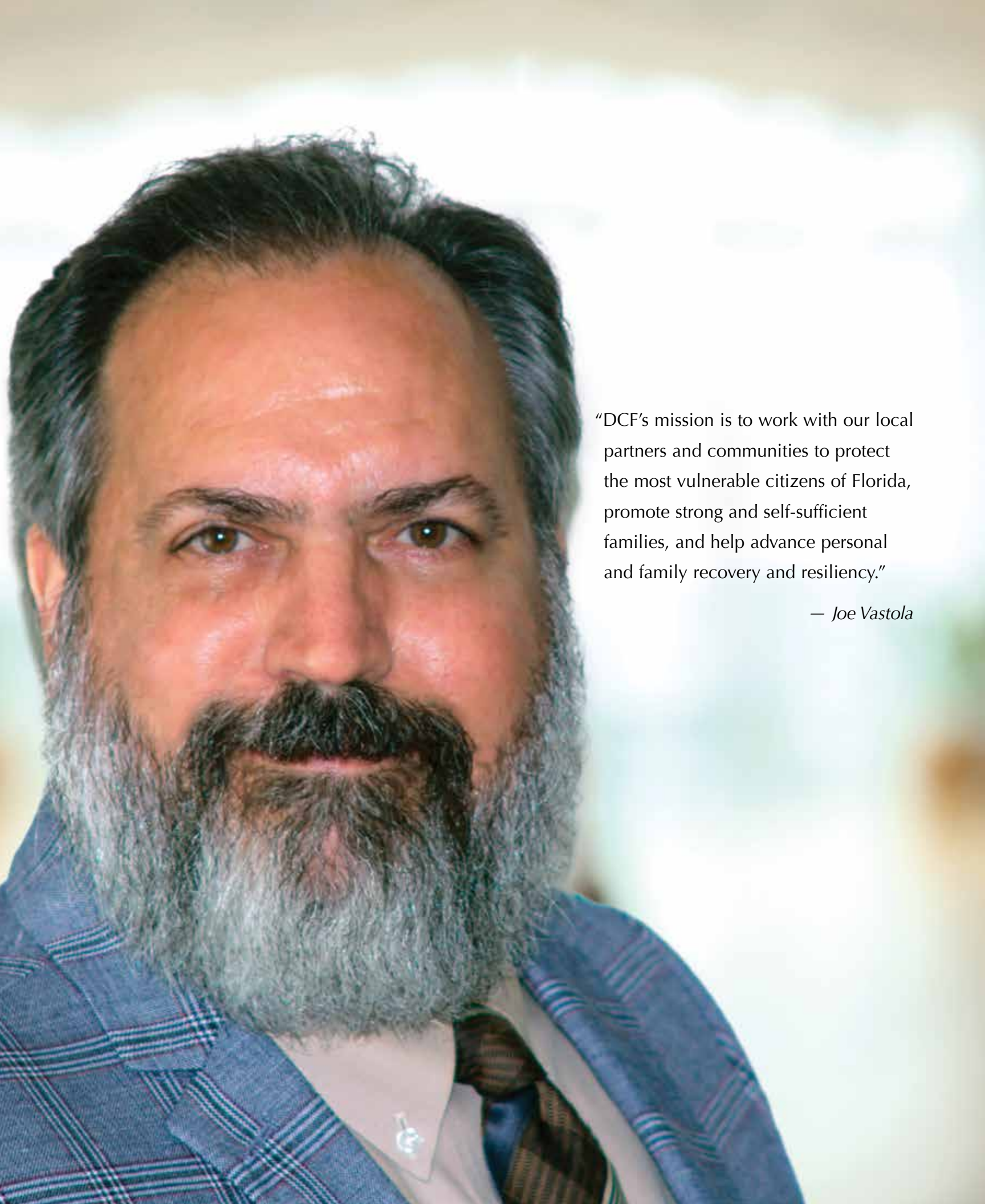
DCF is a large state agency with a budget of just over $3 billion a year. It operates in 67 counties throughout the state of Florida. DCF is organized into six managed regions that handle all of our services throughout the state. The

department has three key programmatic business areas: public assistance, which includes such programs as SNAP (United States Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Medicaid eligibility, and cash assistance; the child welfare program, which is the foster care/child welfare system; and then our substance abuse and mental health program, which handles state hospitals and facilities and all of the activities associated with mental and behavioral health services.

We have just under 12,000 full-time employees who work throughout the state, supported by thousands of contract providers and partners that support the overall mission of the department. It is a large and far-reaching organization that has all of the opportunities and challenges typical of a $3 billion organization.

Now that you've provided us with a sense of the larger organization, would you tell us more about your specific role as a chief information officer at DCF? How is the Office of Information Technology organized and how does it support the overall mission of the department?

We have a centralized IT organization. My responsibility covers all technology assets and infrastructure, which includes management and support of all business applications, solution providers, and contracts to support those applications. Regarding infrastructure, this includes support and management of network, data, and voice communications across our statewide facilities. We have two primary call centers. Our public assistance program call center is staffed by close to 850 people who handle calls related to the public assistance program. We also have a 24/7/365 abuse hotline that is a part of our child welfare

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— *Joe Vastola*

program. We have a statewide group that operates in each of our regions and handles all of the local desktop network support activities. We have a statewide help desk that handles all of the 12,000 IT related calls. We have a set of IT services that support administrative activities such as procurement, budget, and human resources. These functions and activities are carried out by some 238 full-time staff supported by a number of consulting resources. We also work directly with our partners at the Agency for State Technology and the Department of Managed Services which handle our statewide network.

Joe, with such an expansive portfolio and set of responsibilities, would you tell us about some of the challenges faced by your office and how have you sought to address those challenges?

Over the years, the state of Florida made significant investments in technology to automate and implement systems that support DCF's major programs. Some of these systems are dated while others newer. All of these systems house huge amounts of data. One of my biggest challenges is working with customers on data access and integration involving linking data across all programs and turning that data into information.

We've accomplished much in data integration. First, we put in place the department's first master client index. We now can link clients across all of our systems, setting the foundation for data analytics. We use that information in an integrated way to derive more insights into effective services, clients' needs, and more. We're creating a big data virtualized environment to put all of these sources together, link them with the client index, and establish analytical and decision support tools that provide an enterprise picture for our customers.

Another challenge is what I call the balancing of or equalizing the level of IT investment. As I mentioned, we have three core programs. We are working today to bring them all to the same level of IT infrastructure. This is not easy because over the years each program has made different investments and pursued different priorities. Today we are constantly looking at ways to leverage solutions across the IT enterprise.

Despite having legacy technology, we continually challenge ourselves to be agile and deliver the IT solutions and services our customers need to meet their respective missions. Aligning our services to our customers' requirements is necessary as well as challenging.

What makes one an effective leader?

Leaders need to see themselves as team members, but also sometimes coaches and mentors. It is not enough to just show up and tell staff what to do. Effective leaders need to roll up their sleeves and help their staff. Leadership is a balancing act. You need to set expectations, ensure your teams are operating with a sense of urgency, and provide them with the resources to be successful. Effective leaders need to tap those around them who may have more technical understanding and knowledge in a given area. Along with being open, leaders must be passionate about their mission as well.

In the end, leadership is all about people. Focus on helping people achieve the most they can. Have the same expectation for yourself as you do for your management team. Doing these things goes a long way toward making one an effective leader.

DCF has the largest operating budget of all Florida agencies at over $3 billion and the third largest staff at almost 12,000. The CIO role must be very important, keeping the organization connected and providing the tools for employees to do their job. To that end, would you tell us more about your IT plan for DCF and perhaps you could outline your key IT priorities?

My first goal is to put our customers first. We're working on so many things that are important to our customers. We need to constantly communicate with our customers. We need to keep them abreast of project status. We need to understand their needs and goals. It is critical to engage in full transparency and communication to work effectively in support of our customers.

I tell my staff any time you're with a customer, you should be doing your best to gauge customer service, because customer service is a key element of our IT strategy.

From an IT operation side, I focus on operational and delivery excellence. As a CIO, if your IT operation isn't running smoothly, then you'll be facing constant issues and have no time to work on any other initiatives. To establish operational and delivery excellence, it requires a certain level of agility. As an IT organization, we need to identify and implement the technologies that can most effectively assist our customers.

Our infrastructure must also support our entire enterprise. To that end, you look at every opportunity, every change, and

you figure out how you can advance each of your strategic goals, even if it's just a little bit. Our IT strategy includes absolute alignment. We need to know what our business partners need and what their challenges are. We need to constantly be questioning the work that we are doing to make sure that we are in absolute alignment with those requirements.

We also have rigorous performance and project management requirements for our vendors. All of our projects need to work within a model of project management that is understandable and standardized. DCF is linked at the hips with a number of contracted providers that are integral parts of the team. These are our partners and we can't do our work without them.

It's important to be good stewards of public funds and invest them wisely. To that end, I would like to explore the IT capital investment process that DCF uses. Would you tell us how it works and how do you ensure that investment decisions are mission aligned and cost justified?

The state has a rigorous planning process. It is a process that we go through each year to identify our priorities, capital investments, and cost justification for pursuing these initiatives. When we understand what our budget is for the following fiscal year, we then plan our priorities. For those that make the cut with our senior management and agency leadership, we submit proposal requests to the executive office of the governor and to our legislature. We have to submit any proposal that calls for an investment of $1 million or more. The proposal is accompanied with a cost-benefit analysis of why we need the funds, how these funds will be used, potential alternative options, return on investment, and how the initiative fits into the government's larger strategic priorities. We work very closely with the governor's office and the Florida legislature to justify each and every purchase that we have considered to be a priority. For those projects that receive funding, we provide quarterly status reports. Ultimately, this is a very rigorous process that seeks to obtain and justify funding for services and technology that will better serve Florida taxpayers.

Would you elaborate on your efforts to enhance IT governance within your department?

We have two different levels of governance. The first level is business or customer level governance. As I mentioned earlier, DCF has three key program areas and as such there are systems, staff, and funding associated with each program. We need to be doing what our customers in those program areas require. We have very well defined and standardized governance processes for each of those areas, so as to ensure the proper alignment of our services to their IT requirements. The work we do enhancing our business systems and infrastructure is directly tied to the needs and priorities of our customers. I just outlined the capital IT planning process. Our customers are hooked into this process because ROI and the benefits from a new investment aren't simply an IT concern, but go to the core of our customers being able to deliver on their mission.

From business or customer level governance, we go to department level governance. This allows department leadership to access our priorities and efforts with a necessary enterprise perspective. It is at this point that leadership can and sometimes does redirect our efforts to ensure we are doing what's best for the department as well as the programs. Having business and department level governance drives our focus and helps use identify the most important things that we should be doing.

There is much talk about migrating infrastructure to the cloud. Would you tell us more about your efforts migrating to the cloud?

In December 2017, we moved the first state government system in Florida to the cloud and that was our child welfare system. In Florida we have our Agency of State Technology. They are our data center. About two years ago, legislation directed us to transform our child welfare system and move it to the cloud. In the end, moving this system to the cloud reduced the overall costs for infrastructure and managed services. Customers are telling me that the performance of the system is significantly better. In January 2018, we had

43,000 more logons for the month. It showed us that there was a pent up amount of work that wasn't getting done and when the capacity and performance of the system was enhanced, then that work was able to be done.

We've had significant success moving applications to the cloud. We have a number of smaller applications and one of our licensing divisions that run in the cloud today. We are in the process in our substance abuse and mental health program of building a cross organization financial and service tracking system that will also be hosted in the cloud. We are looking to do more with the cloud where it's appropriate and where it's cost effective. Performance is up and costs are down.

What are you doing to spur innovation across the department? And more importantly, how are you changing the way information technology is done within DCF?

The results we are seeing using agile methodology have been very positive. Often times what we're planning to get done within a set of sprints gets done in a shorter timeframe. Secondly, we're finding that the quality of the product at the end is significantly better. By quality, I do mean both the quality of the software and the testing, but more importantly, it's the quality of alignment of the function with the expectations of our users.

When we used the waterfall method we'd find ourselves six months down the line, getting ready to implement, and realizing that the requirements we captured six months before weren't complete or didn't take into account the full picture. The move to agile has completely eliminated such situations.

We are seeing alignment with customer requirements, but we're witnessing the application unfold during the sprints. It involves key stakeholders who are prepared, are ready, and understand that if there are any serious changes there is a process in place during the sprints to pivot. We've received tremendous benefit from moving to an agile approach. It has truly changed the way we do our IT business in DCF.

> To learn more about the Florida Department of Children and Families, go to myflfamilies.com

To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Joe Vastola, go to businessofgovernment.org.

To download the show as a podcast, go to PodcastOne, iTunes, and businessofgovernment.org.

To view excerpts of the show, go to youtube.com/ businessofgovernment.

To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Joe Vastola, go to businessofgovernment.org.