

NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

An award-winning solution for Freedom of Information Law compliance



ESSENTIALS

Challenge

Due to the inefficiencies of a manual and paper-based workflow for processing Freedom of Information Law requests, the Health Department faced increased exposure to litigation, and its average response time for requests was exceeding the limits of the law.

Solution

The EMC Captiva InputAccel intelligent enterprise capture solution

Key benefits

- Response times for processing FOIL requests reduced by half, bringing agency in compliance with the law
- Automation of cumbersome, paper-based processes brings new efficiencies and a significant reduction in errors
- Time to bring new staff up to full productivity reduced from one year to 12 weeks
- Significant cost reductions in printing, shipping, and storage of paper, with a 95 percent reduction in the ordering of paper and printing supplies
- Amount of hard copy responses received from department program areas reduced by 75 percent

BUSINESS OVERVIEW

The New York State Department of Health is the governmental body responsible for public health in the state of New York. Based in the state capitol of Albany, the department has more than 6,000 employees working in five regional and multiple district offices throughout the state. The Health Department also directs and oversees patient care and research at five health care facilities: the Helen Hayes Hospital specializing in physical rehabilitation, and four New York State Veterans' Homes that provide long-term care for veterans and their dependents.

CHALLENGES

Like all New York state agencies, the Department of Health is subject to the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), Public Officers Law Article 6, which provides for public access to governmental records. The stated objective of FOIL is to provide prompt disclosure of public information to ensure accountability to the public, and to promote public participation in public health activities and decision-making. The law establishes very specific requirements regarding FOIL requests; for example, within five business days of receipt of a written request, the agency must make the record available, deny access in writing giving the reasons for denial, or furnish a written acknowledgment of receipt of the request and a statement of the approximate date when the request will be granted or denied.

Within the Health Department, the Records Access Office (RAO) is responsible for ensuring the appropriate agency response to public requests for access to records. Typical citizen requests range from inquiries about the safety records of nursing homes and other facilities to information about bids for capital equipment purchases and other large expenditures. The RAO handles about 5,000 FOIL requests per year, amounting to more than 10,000,000 pages.

LARGE VOLUMES OF PAPER LEAD TO DELAYS AND HIGHER COSTS

Although the Department of Health's responses to FOIL requests average 575 pages, large requests can require the RAO to review and produce more than 10,000 pages of documents. Requests are received by mail, fax, or email and must be carefully logged and tracked. The responses require careful analysis and production of large quantities of records which are often located in various parts of the department as well as in offices across the state.

Previously, the RAO relied on a manual and paper-based workflow for processing FOIL requests that required the agency to photocopy more than 1,000,000 pages annually. RAO personnel had limited access to documents since boxes of paper files had to be retrieved

and then wait to be scanned. There was always the risk of incomplete files being recovered or sent, but typically the first sign that pages were missing would be a complaint from the recipient.

As a result, the costs associated with paper production and transfer of records were growing significantly every year, as was the number of personnel required to fully process each FOIL request to meet legal mandates. Due to the inefficiencies of the paper-based process, the Health Department faced increased exposure to litigation—and its average response time for FOIL requests was in fact exceeding the limits of the law.

“FOIL compliance is a huge issue not only for the Health Department, but also for all agencies in our state,” says Ray Miller, former Assistant Director COE, Records Access Office, Administration Division. “We wanted to be on the forefront of automated document capture technology and adopt a solution that would not only shorten our own response times, but also serve as a model for other agencies.”

EMC SOLUTION

The Health Department’s new solution, the Smart Processing FOIL System (SPFS), has been so successful that it recently won a Best Practices Award in Technical Implementation from the New York State Forum—a network of state and local government organizations and information technology leaders and professionals concerned with information management, policy, and operations.

SPFS is an automated platform for FOIL compliance based on the EMC Captiva® InputAccel® intelligent enterprise capture solution. Rather than sending paper documents to the RAO for processing as was previously done, personnel within individual Health Department bureaus now use InputAccel to capture and transform the paper into electronic information, where it is then stored in a IBM-FileNet content repository.

Captiva InputAccel offered a cost-effective, easy-to-deploy solution that could be quickly adopted by individual bureaus.

“We could never cost-justify deploying different systems for each division,” says Miller. “What made sense was a ‘black box’ solution that could be rapidly deployed and would provide common functionality across the entire agency, covering all ingestion points. InputAccel was the ideal choice because it is a stable product with very robust functionality, and its modules are very easy to use and extend without having to spend much time tuning and configuring them. We I can’t say enough about the EMC representatives who immediately grasped our requirements and had strong insight into how to make a government IT project successful.”

AN AUTOMATED, STREAMLINED PROCESS

In the SPFS workflow, a FOIL request is routed to the appropriate bureau (for instance, an inquiry about an assisted living facility would be directed to the Department of Home and Community Based Care) in fax, email, or paper format. The request is entered into a tracking system which generates a FOIL reference number and coversheets, and then routed to the bureau staff member responsible for gathering supporting documents. That staff member then scans the documents into the repository using InputAccel. From there, the RAO can access the documents to organize, review, and redact the response data needed to create a final FOIL response.

An important new addition to SPFS is EMC Captiva Input, an add-on to Captiva InputAccel that provides the bureaus with a means of scanning and indexing documents into the repository via a thin Web client. With Input, the bureaus have a means of simple document capture using a Web browser, without having to maintain costly and cumbersome thick client scanner software installations.

“Previously, we were spending far too much of our time dealing with scanner equipment management, but with Input, we don’t have to deal with scanner hardware, firmware, or software issues,” says Miller. “It’s a huge time saver.”

SIGNIFICANT, QUANTIFIABLE BENEFITS

SPFS has had a profound impact on the Health Department’s ability to respond to FOIL requests in an efficient, timely, and compliant manner. In fact, the new paperless system has cut the agency’s FOIL response time in half, and the Health Department has been able to increase its compliance rate for on-time FOIL responses by up to 95 percent. Whereas FOIL requests previously took up to 40 business days to resolve, they can now be processed in less than 20 business days—placing the agency in compliance with the law.

In addition to increased efficiency and compliance, SPFS has delivered other significant benefits for the Department. The average time required to train new RAO staff on the processing of FOIL requests has gone from an entire year to only 12 weeks, and there have been savings on printing, shipping, and paper storage for FOIL response data. The RAO has seen a 95 percent reduction in the ordering of paper and printing supplies, and a 75 percent reduction in the amount of hard copy FOIL responses received from department program areas.

“The SPFS system has been so successful that it has grabbed the attention of other agencies grappling with FOIL response issues. When we speak with others about how we approached the problem, we always sing the praises of EMC Captiva InputAccel and the EMC support we received—without which this project could not have been realized. It’s a great example of how, with the right technology, you can turn a modest budget into a program with huge impact.”

RAY MILLER

FORMER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR COE, RECORDS ACCESS OFFICE, ADMINISTRATION DIVISION

SUMMARY

With its SPFS solution for FOIL requests, the New York State Department of Health has taken a giant step in its efforts to operate efficiently, maintain compliance, and respond to the public in a timely manner. Based on EMC Captiva InputAccel for electronic document capture, the new solution has delivered substantial benefits in the form of shortened response times, faster training, and reduced costs related to the handling and processing of paper.

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CONTACT US

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