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Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives
House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare
Leaving the Sticky Notes Behind: Harnessing Innovation and
New Technology to Help America's Foster Youth Succeed
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Good morning, Chairman LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Marty Elisco, and I'm the CEO of Augintel, a Chicago-based AI company dedicated to child welfare. After 15 years at Motorola and Zebra Technologies, where I designed public safety radio systems and helped the VA adopt patient safety technology, I started Augintel because dedication to social services, entrepreneurship and job creation runs in my family. In fact, Representative Davis, over a hundred years ago, my great grandfather started a candy distribution business – the Maywood Candy Company – right in your district. I am driven to bring cutting edge technology to where it's needed most – child welfare.

We hear a lot about the future of AI, but I'm going to share how AI is making lives better for children, families and social workers today, and how it will help take child welfare where it needs to be. Our AI is strengthening organizations such as Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Allegheny County Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and the California-based nonprofit Aspiranet that supports youth transitioning out of foster care. Directly related to President Trump's executive order mentioned earlier directing the use of AI to modernize child welfare systems, there is much government can learn from the organizations already doing it.

Child welfare workers are some of the most dedicated professionals in government but are constantly stymied with too much administrative work, and too little insight, into the needs and histories of those they care for. If you visit a child welfare office, you will undoubtedly see caseworkers spending hours each day working with outdated technology, clicking through case notes one-by-one in green-screen systems, or sifting through their pile of sticky notes for that one name they needed. They are forced to spend hours per day on administrative work, rather than engaging with families.

My Augintel co-founders and I knew AI could solve these very serious problems. We wanted to do it right – build AI that would be trusted by social workers and fit to their unique, stressful work, and build AI that would improve outcomes for children. We interviewed hundreds of social workers, and we hired former social workers. Today, Augintel is used by child welfare organizations across the US.

Imagine if you were a social worker trying to understand a family's housing history. Have they been evicted or homeless? Have supportive services been offered in the past? You would have to read through hundreds of notes. In fact, 80 percent of all child welfare data is in the notes, or what we call

"unstructured data" and nearly impossible to find. It's been this way for decades, and it gets in the way of helping children at risk.

AI uniquely solves this by unearthing critical information buried in the notes in these outdated systems – such as key events, risks, strengths and social determinants – all while making it super easy for them to use. We call this "content intelligence," and you can think of it as an internet search engine or even GenAI but built for child welfare. It's already saving each social worker five hours per week, making them more effective.

In Illinois over 6,000 staff use Augintel. Illinois DCFS Director Heidi Mueller, author of the Policy and Practice article "Artificial Intelligence in Child Welfare," stated, "We use AI from Augintel to access narrative data to deliver insights that leadership can count on, better identify needs of families we serve, and empower staff."

We improve outcomes in three key ways – we improve safety by identifying early warning signs of harm that social workers then proactively act on, such as drug use, we accelerate finding permanent living situations by tripling the size of the child's network of family and fictive kin supports, and we improve well-being by surfacing unmet needs, so families can be provided with services to address those needs.

For example, teenage pregnancy in foster care can be a safety risk. In Illinois, DCFS offers fantastic programs to support expectant mothers. However, these programs go underutilized because outdated systems cannot identify if a young woman is pregnant. Augintel surfaces this, notifies staff, and effective outreach occurs. Before AI, DCFS knew of less than 100 expectant mothers in their care, then, with AI they became aware of 621 more who can now make use of this program.

This capability extends across all types of unmet needs, such as with youth transitioning out of foster care. We identify youth who have expressed interest in college education, so that they can be connected to the Chafee program to help fund it.

Simply put, AI provides knowledge to fix problems at scale.

I'll also note that we don't need to replace outdated systems, we overlay them by adding necessary capabilities they lack. Augintel is one-tenth the cost of a SACWIS system replacement, is 50 percent reimbursable through Title IV-E, and is implemented in months not years.

I've just scratched the surface. We have so many more examples of success that should be scaled across the US child welfare system. Driven by the executive order, states need encouragement, funding and the elimination of red tape to move forward. And thanks to the work already being done, they do not need to start at square one.

Additional Details:

Regarding shifting from a culture of compliance and administrative tasks to one that allows caseworkers to spend more time serving foster youth: Caseworkers spend over four hours per day on administrative work. This is because most administrative work today in child welfare is required for agencies to remain in compliance with regulations tied to funding streams. This takes the caseworker's available time away the critical work – engaging with families and providing social services. Augintel alleviates a significant about of administrative work by collecting compliance-related data in the background based on the case notes they are already documenting, so they can spend more time delivering care.

Additionally, Augintel helps establish and build trust with youth. By surfacing critical history and life events for caseworkers, foster youth don't need to repeat their traumatic stories to each caseworker assigned to them over and over again – the caseworker already knows. We hear many stores of children and families "finally feeling heard by the system" because of this.

Regarding using technology to identify unmet needs, so interventions can be provided to children and families, and federal program utilization can be maximized: Addressing unmet needs is a critical aspect of child welfare. By addressing unmet needs, risk of harm and abuse is reduced, and the likelihood of a positive outcome increases. Also, many federal programs exist to address unmet needs but go underutilized. This is because outdated systems do not have the capability to surface the existence of those unmet needs, even though descriptions of them, written by caseworkers, are contained in those systems. Augintel uses a form of AI called natural language processing used to extract insights from text, then tailors it to understand the nuanced language of child welfare. Through this, Augintel accurately detects existence of unmet needs, then notifies caseworkers, so that they can provide those services already available through federal and state programs.

Regarding using AI to assess quality and effectiveness of child welfare services so federal funding is effectively utilized, especially regarding the Chafee program: As we know, according to the GAO, each year, Chafee dollars directed to support older youth transitioning out of foster care with housing and education services go underutilized. Our AI identifies those who have expressed interest in attending college, so that the caseworker can offer Chafee services to them, address this unmet need, improve utilization of these funds, and improve the likelihood of success in adulthood.

Additionally, government must know the efficacy of dollars spent, and efficacy is determined by the outcome of the service provided. However, outcomes are extremely difficult to quantify because outdated systems can't surface them. Augintel's AI mines the unstructured data for descriptions of outcomes and provides evidence of how those outcomes were tied to the services that were delivered and to associated funding. With this information, program quality and efficacy is tracked, and stakeholders are held accountable. Importantly, this data is collected in the background without requiring additional administrative or compliance work to be performed by the caseworker.

Regarding using AI to help caseworkers extract and piece together unstructured data and how it can also help child welfare agencies identify trends in child welfare cases across the state: Data about children exists across multiple outdated systems across various programs both internal and external to child welfare. With the appropriate cross-agency data sharing provisions in place, Augintel consolidates information about individuals from across systems, then presents that information in a streamlined way to caseworkers. For example, if the child welfare system identifies an unmet need, which is then delivered by an external program, both organizations can coordinate their services and maximize efficacy of services provided. Today this coordination is fragmented and unreliable – it requires many emails and phone calls between caseworkers and families and piles of sticky notes – causing valuable information to be missed, and service quality to be diminished.

Child welfare leaders also use Augintel to run their organizations, such as by identifying trends across the state that need to be addressed. Augintel's Analytics group works closely with leaders and their quality improvement teams to "deep dive" into data. This enables leaders to identify problem areas across their states and counties, such as where resources should be allocated and where programs should be established or eliminated.

Regarding how AI helps caseworkers prepare for court and how this reduces the time children enter into permanent living situations: Court preparation and participation require significant time from caseworkers. With outdated systems, court preparation requires days of reading through case notes one-by-one across multiple systems to gather information and case summaries required by judges and attorneys. Augintel surfaces this information immediately for caseworkers so that they can compile them for the court reporting.

Meanwhile, during court, caseworkers are often asked additional information on the spot. Prior to AI, if the caseworker did not have that information at hand, the court would require a continuance for the caseworker to return to the office to gather the data, which would delay the hearing by days or weeks. During this time, the child is typically housed out-of-home. With Augintel, caseworkers can pull up their smartphone in court, search for this case information in real time, and relay that information directly to the court.

By drastically reducing the need for delays and continuances and reducing the time needed to prepare for court, the child can be returned to a safe environment much more quickly.