# QUESTIONS TO ASK A DATA SYSTEM VENDOR

It’s an exciting time: you have funding for a new data system and you’re eager to get going. You’ve talked to a few software vendors, seen some data system demos, and they all sound great. So how do you choose the right data system for your program’s current and future needs? How do you make sure everything you need is in the contract before you sign on the dotted line?

The simple answer is that you ask many questions. Of course, most child-welfare professionals are not information technology (IT) experts, and your tribe’s IT department may not be familiar with all the ins and outs of case management systems. This guide will help you ask the right questions and use the answers to choose a data system wisely, avoiding unpleasant surprises down the line.

## Hardware and Infrastructure Requirements

**Is the vendor’s software client-based or web-based? Server-based or cloud-based?**

“Client-based” means that the data system software is installed on, and can only be accessed from, a specific physical computer. Web-based systems can be accessed from any web browser with a staff person's user ID and password.

A server-based system is installed on physical hardware that is owned and operated by your tribe. Cloud-based systems are installed on off-site servers that lease you a certain amount of space and data usage. Bring your tribe's IT people into the conversation early to help you work out what kind of system would be most appropriate for your program.

**Will the software run on the tribe’s current technology infrastructure? Is it compatible?**

No matter what kind of data system you consider, you'll need to make sure that you have the right kind of hardware, software, and network connections for it to work. Again, involve your tribe's IT staff as early as possible to help you figure out what you have and what you need.

**Does the vendor offer data hosting services? If so, how much data and what are the prices?**

If your tribe doesn't have the server capacity to host a data system, ask your vendor if they offer hosting services or can recommend third party-hosting. It's important to know up front how much space and data usage you'll need and what that will cost over time.

# Data System Software Features

**Is the software flexible by design? What changes can your IT staff make and what changes would the vendor need to make? Is the source code accessible to you?**

Think about who will have control of your system once it is purchased. The software should be flexible enough for your IT staff to add components, such as drop-down lists for data fields, and to add or remove users and adjust their security access. More complex changes, like adding data fields, changing the interface, or making connections to other tribal systems — such as your financial, courts, or other social services programs — are typically done by the vendor. However, if your tribe has robust IT capabilities, you might want additional flexibility to make your own changes. Don't forget to think to the future!

**Is the software designed to grow and expand with your program? What other modules are available if needed?**

Again, remember to think about the future.  As you add staff, program functions, or even entire programs, can your data system grow with you? What other modules (e.g., General Assistance, TANF, DV, residential/shelter home) does the vendor offer? Can customized modules be created for your program? Will these be in your price range?

**How many staffers can access a case record? Who can update information about a case and when? Can access to certain areas or specific cases be restricted?**

The data system you select should match your current workflow. Consider how many staffers should be able to view or edit information about a case at any given time. Who has control of the case information (i.e., the staff person assigned to the case)? Can specific security levels be set for some workers to only have viewing ability while others are able to edit information? Also, consider whether you want the ability to restrict access to individual cases — for example, if a client has a relative that works in your office, you might show the client respect by making sure that the relative can't access the client’s personal data.

**How do supervisors assign and approve cases? How are cases transferred from one staff person to another? Who can enter or change information about a case?**

Think about supervisory approvals and other points where approvals are needed in case work, as well as when cases might transfer to other workers or supervisors. Often, cases need to be transferred due to issues such as worker turnover, caseload, or leave of absence; a different worker handling foster care, family preservation, or family violence services; or a family moves to a new part of the tribal land. In these cases, access to the case information may be required by more than one worker and supervisor, or the case information may need to be transferred to a new worker and supervisor. The staff needs to be aware of how the system works regarding who has control of case information at any one time. This will cut down on duplication of cases and on conflicting critical information about each case such as dates of birth, addresses, and social security numbers.

**What about entering (or “converting”) historical cases? What’s reasonable? How far back?**

Think about how far back you generally look into your case files. Also, think about their format (e.g., paper files, spreadsheets, another data system) and talk to your vendor about whether they can help you convert the records for the new data system and the level of effort required.

**Does the software have built-in report templates for the reports needed? Is there a custom report builder? Will the vendor include report building in the maintenance contract or will the vendor train you on how to build reports?**

Any vendor should easily be able to build in report templates for all your basic reporting needs (e.g., BIA, IV-B, AFCARS), and should also be able to build customized reports for any specialized reporting (e.g., court, Tribal Council) or program management report needs. However, don't forget to think to the future! As your program grows, so will your data needs. With a custom report builder, you can create your own reports rather than paying the vendor to come back and do it for you.

**How does the data system clean up duplicative case information?**

A data system can get bogged down with duplication. When more than one staff person is able to enter case information, the case can be entered multiple times with different case numbers. The case information entered may be different. Duplication is going to happen; therefore, systems need an upfront solution and procedures to prevent duplication. For example, is the data system able to merge duplicate individuals or cases?

**Can the data system connect to other data systems being used by other tribal departments? How can data be shared or transferred between systems?**

Your Tribal Court, TANF program, or other tribal department may already be using a data system from a different vendor, or may install a new system in the future. Ask your potential vendor if their system can interface with the systems used in other departments, and if so, what data can be shared and how?

## Data System Development

**Does the vendor have a version of the software that your staff can “test drive” for usability and flow?**

Sometimes vendors can install a demonstration or “demo” version of the software for you and your staff to try out. This will give you an idea of the system interface and whether it feels right for those who will be using it. Usability (i.e., how easy it is for people to use the software) is a factor that often gets overlooked in system development, but it can make a big difference in getting staffers to actually use the system once you have it.

**What kind of development methodology does the vendor company use?**

A development methodology is a framework that structures the process of developing a data system. How will your system requirements be worked out? Are there distinct phases of development to be completed in a linear order, or will there be multiple phases of testing and adjustment? How involved will you and your staff be in planning and testing? Your vendor should be able to explain their methodology so that you have a clear understanding of how the process will work and how long it will take.

**How many face-to-face visits does the vendor build into the contract? If additional visits are needed, what will those cost?**

It's important that the vendor spend enough face-to-face time with you and your staff to learn how your program does business before software development even starts. They should also plan for visits to discuss feedback during development, and to troubleshoot after data system installation. You should be comfortable with the number of visits planned and how they are distributed throughout the development process. Additionally, you may ask if the visits are built into the overall price or a separate fee to make sure you're not surprised.

**How will the vendor let you know when items are ready for testing? Will they communicate with you if there are delays to the agreed-upon schedule?**

Establish a plan and expectations for communication with your vendor from the start. Developing a data system is a stressful enough process without needing to chase down your vendor for updates or wondering if there's something you're supposed to be doing. The vendor should be able to tell you how they typically communicate with clients and how often, but also be willing to adjust the plan so that it works for you.

**What leeway is given for additional requirements not identified at the beginning?**

No matter how thoroughly you plan, at some point during data system development you may realize that there's an important requirement that you didn't think to include. Establish up front whether your vendor can accommodate changes or additions along the way — and how much it's going to cost you. The vendor should allow some flexibility on new requirements depending on their impact. However, if the new requirement changes the whole framework of the data system, the vendor may not include it in the current contract price.

**What are some typical hurdles to expect with a planned installation?**

Installing a new data system always comes with challenges. Your vendor should be able to give you some examples of challenges they have encountered and how they handled them. If they tell you they've never had a problem during installation — encourage them to think a little more about it!

**Are you able to get the newest version before the “go live” date? What about after?**

Vendors frequently make updates to their software to fix bugs, update security, and improve the interface. Make sure your data system will have the most recent updates at the launch—and that you'll continue to get software updates through the life of your data system.

## Security

**How is access to the system controlled?**

Just like you would lock a filing cabinet and control who has the key, you'll protect your client data by controlling who can access your data system. This can be done by controlling access to a physical workstation or electronically through user accounts and/or passwords. Make sure the data system's access controls will work well with how your office and program work.

**How will data be protected on the back end?**

Just as you would with any important personal information, you'll want to make sure that your data is safe from hacking, viruses, or other dangers. If you will be storing data on your tribe's servers, be sure that you know who else will have access to those servers and what they can see.

**For hosting services, how often is data backed up? Can you get a physical backup copy of your data and if so, how often? What contingencies are in place in case of server failure or if the vendor goes out of business?**

*Note: If you're using your tribal servers, you'll want to ask these same questions of your IT staff!*

## Pricing

**Does the vendor estimate a price for the entire project or by the hour for programming time?**

If the vendor estimates a flat fee for the entire data system project, find out exactly what that fee includes (and doesn't include) — and get it in writing. If the vendor charges per hour of programming time, make sure you're protected in the contract from unauthorized overages — or the risk of not receiving your system at all because the programmers couldn't finish within the estimated time. Generally, it is better to get a flat fee price so that you can ensure the work will be completed.

**How are fees for licenses charged — by concurrent users or by data station? How many users are able to connect to the system at one time?**

Your preferences on this may depend on the size of your staff and how they work, as well as the options offered by the vendor. In a typical child welfare office, the staff works in the office during the day so you would want to have as many licenses as there are workers, supervisors, support staff, program management, and data systems staff. If your staff works in shifts, you could negotiate fewer licenses based on how many users would be working at any given time. However, as always, we recommend also thinking ahead — your staff may grow — and you do not want to be limited to a finite number of licensed users.

**How much is due at contract signing and how much on delivery/completion of the data system?**

To make sure you get the finished data system you're expecting when you're expecting it, make sure the vendor has financial motivation to get your data system done on time by withholding a reasonable portion of the purchase price until delivery. Put it in the contract, and remember to include a reasonable timeline for progress and delivery in the contract, as well!

**Is there a guarantee of satisfaction with the vendor's software? Does the vendor have a return policy? Is there a partial refund beyond so many days if you are not satisfied or the system is not finished in the agreed-upon timeframe?**

As with any other type of expensive electronics, you want to make sure the vendor honors their product and will make sure that it works for your program's needs. Be sure you do your due diligence in testing all facets of the software and its performance after installation. For example, you'll need to make sure the software runs well when all program staff are using it at the same time. Does the software lag at times? Are your staff encountering bugs in the software? You may not have an issue — if you negotiated a performance-based contract saying you would pay the last installment to the vendor after satisfaction with the software has been determined.

**If you want to change or expand in the future, what will that cost?**

Earlier we talked about the importance of thinking to your future needs when planning for your data system. If down the road you need new reports, new data fields, or even an entirely new section or module for a new program, what will the vendor charge to do that for you? If you have a support or maintenance contract, what is included?

## Training, Support, and Maintenance

**Does the vendor provide staff training and a training manual?**

The best system in the world is useless if your people aren't trained how to use it — and if you don't have a way to train future hires.

**What type of support does the vendor offer after the go-live date?**

Many vendors offer or even require you to purchase a maintenance contract or agreement. Be sure to ask how much it costs, how long it lasts, and what it includes (and doesn't include). If there is an annual fee, will that fee stay the same or increase every year? How many times can you access their support without additional charge? What response time can you expect when you call, and what is the maximum turnaround time for getting bugs fixed?

**How does the vendor handle software updates/upgrades?**

Does the vendor charge for upgrades or are they included in the system price? Does the vendor notify clients of the upgrades? How often does the vendor upgrade?

## Vendor Experience

**How long has the company been in business? How large is its client base? What experience does the vendor have working with tribes and tribal systems? How many customers have been tribal child welfare programs? Does the vendor have references to share?**

Many of these questions can be asked not just *to* a vendor, but also *about* a vendor. Talking to someone else who has experience with a particular vendor is a great way to learn more about the vendor's process and product. Remember that the Capacity Building Center for Tribes is always happy to facilitate peer-to-peer consultation if you want to hear about the experiences of other tribal child welfare programs with a particular vendor or type of system!