Sierra Systems, an NTT DATA Company based in Vancouver, has over 50 years of experience in consulting, implementation, and managed services and is a gold Microsoft partner.

**A work in progress**

With all of Alberta’s vast natural resources, prosperity, and economic growth in recent decades, it is easy to assume that homelessness and poverty have no place in its cities. Unfortunately, Calgary, like so many other affluent municipalities across Canada and the United States, continues to struggle with these complex social issues.

It is not for lack of effort, creativity, or compassion. Take the Calgary Drop-In Centre (the DI), for example. For more than 55 years, the DI has provided emergency shelter, health services, community resources, and housing support to people in need. Operating out of its impressive community center in downtown Calgary, the DI’s team of 270 employees manages many programs designed to help vulnerable people.

In 2018, the DI served an average of 1,400 people per day and helped 324 individuals find housing, including 212 long-term shelter residents.

**Amazing programs**

The DI’s programs cater to the many needs of the community. Its shelter program has a nightly capacity of more than 1,000 clients. It provides primary healthcare services, including the staffing of full-time nurses. Additionally, employment support, education services, and housing, including transitional housing, rounds out the many ways the DI’s programs support the community.

“All the pain had been pushed to frontline staff. They had to move back and forth between multiple systems and enter data up to five times.”

– Helen Wetherley Knight, Director of IT, Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre
Behind the scenes, the DI came to rely on a mishmash of IT systems, out-of-date devices, and costly point solutions to run its many programs. Instead of investing in new technology, the DI did what too many well-intentioned non-profits do: It relied on “free” tools and used donated technology. That approach translated into costly operational inefficiencies and huge frustrations for frontline employees.

Mired in technical issues as a result of relying on no less than 170 disparate systems, the DI was ready for change. A new IT director, Helen Wetherley Knight, made the strategic business case for digital transformation. She measured the full impact of technology across the entire organization. Her analysis determined that outdated IT cost the organization two million dollars in annual productivity.

“We felt obligated to shore up all the technical systems so that our social workers can practice their craft, rather than fight antiquated technology.”

**Bold new vision**

After developing a plan for a complete digital transformation, and rigorous request for proposal (RFP) process, the DI selected Microsoft certified partner Sierra Systems to modernize their operations. With the initial installation of Office 365 the DI set the foundation for optimization. Toolsets such as Microsoft Teams, the modern hub for team collaboration in Office 365, was made available to employees while Sierra Systems supported the customizations and integrations to configure the environment.

DI staff embraced Microsoft Teams, using it for everything from sharing calendars and booking boardrooms, to conducting surveys with Microsoft Forms. In fact, the DI has begun providing Office 365 access and training to their clients as part of their free employment skills programs.

A big part of the DI’s digital transformation includes a gradual move to Dynamics 365, the modern suite of operations applications. The DI intends to replace its mishmash of siloed systems with one powerful, integrated, solution. Already, Dynamics 365 is managing internal employee ticketing services, health and safety, as well as fleet management.

The DI looks to eventually run every aspect of its operations with Dynamics 365. Plans are in place to roll out external client management, client employment services, self-serve client kiosk and Human Resources management, using tools such as Dynamics 365 for Talent. Once implemented, this top-to-bottom integration will provide a complete and accurate view of the DI’s environment and its impact on the community.

**Future insights**

The DI’s digital transformation may also provide new and better data for research into remedying homelessness and poverty. Traditionally, researchers have relied primarily on vulnerable people, who often have no government ID, to self-identify and report. Being able to collect, analyze, and report reliable field data based on biometrics and software could change everything.
To understand the impact, consider that most shelters use clients’ self-identity with their name and birthdate or a physical ID card. The problem is that such systems are open to obfuscation, loss, theft, and ID sharing. Many clients in need of emergency services may not carry current documentation on them. If a client has had negative interactions in a shelter, they can simply give a different name so that their old record will not be found. Biometrics, such as fingerprints or facial recognition, eliminate those issues while yielding more reliable data.

With Sierra System’s help, the DI is currently testing biometrics, using Azure Cognitive Services to perform facial recognition integrated with a Dynamics 365 database of client records. This solution will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the DI’s intake processes, reduce costs, and significantly minimize the stress on clients.

Better security

While their infrastructure was entirely on-premises in 2016, by 2020, the DI plans to manage all operations from within the Microsoft Cloud. This digital transformation journey will support the DI—and its clients, volunteers, employees, donors, and the community at large—with enterprise-grade security and world-class disaster recovery capabilities through the Microsoft global datacenter network.

“Dynamics 365 is an excellent solution for nonprofits. Microsoft provides an Accelerator through their Tech for Social Impact program with functionality specifically designed for nonprofits and the platform’s flexibility allows customers to further configure the solution to meet the unique requirements of their operations, like those at the drop-in centre”

— Tom Amerongen, Practice Lead, Microsoft Dynamics Solutions, Sierra Systems