

# Youth Villages increases counselor retention by reducing documentation time using Dragon®

## Challenge

Helping troubled youth is a stressful and demanding job requiring long hours and extensive paperwork. Youth Villages needed a way to streamline the documentation process to curb counselor burn-out and reduce turnover rates.

## Solution

Dragon enables counselors to dictate notes into a digital voice recorder during times of the day they could not previously complete work, then automatically transcribe those notes to their office PC. Other features, like voice shortcuts and custom voice commands further speed and simplify paperwork.

## Results

Time studies showed that Dragon reduced family counselors' paperwork time by as much as 55% over typing. Since introducing Dragon, Youth Villages has also seen increased counselor retention and consistency in job satisfaction levels.

Youth Villages, a leading private non-profit organization, is dedicated to helping children with serious emotional and behavioral problems and their families live successfully. Youth Villages' 1,600 counselors and support staff help more than 12,000 children each year from locations in 40 cities across 10 states and the District of Columbia. Dedicated to helping troubled youth overcome their challenges in the least restrictive setting—preferably their own homes—Youth Villages' family counselors have a stressful and demanding job.



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**Brian Cheek**

Clinical Applications Manager, Youth Villages

Counselors conduct intensive in-home therapy, typically meeting with the child and family several times a week for four to six months or longer. To improve outcomes, they often work closely with teachers, neighbors, extended family, and members of the child’s peer group. What’s more, because these youth are in crisis, counselors must be available to the family 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

While Youth Villages is committed to assigning manageable case loads, family counselors still spend long hours traveling to meetings and conducting therapy sessions – often across broad coverage areas. In addition, counselors are responsible for the timely completion of extensive case documentation—session notes, contact notes, assessments, weekly treatment plans, monthly summaries and more—in order to meet state contractual requirements. Many counselors have no choice but to complete this paperwork at home in the evening after an already long and stressful day out in the community. Over time, this grueling pace can lead to counselor burn-out and high turnover rates.

“When I was working as a family counselor, I was gone most days from about 8 AM to 6 PM driving from session to session,” said Brian Cheek, Youth Villages’ clinical applications manager. “Then when I got home, I still had to spend up to a couple of hours typing my documentation. This daily routine was burning me out, so I needed to find a way to take advantage of all that time during my day when I could not typically complete work.”

**Greater productivity on the go**

Cheek told his supervisor about software that could be used with digital voice recorders for automating the transcription process. Youth Villages decided to test the product to see if productivity could be increased and turnover decreased. They purchased Cheek a recorder that came with Dragon speech recognition software from Nuance. Cheek started realizing productivity gains almost immediately. Dragon turns talk into text three times faster than most people type with up to 99% accuracy. Ready to use right out of the box, the software learns to recognize the user’s voice instantly and becomes even more accurate with continued use.

“With Dragon, I was able to take advantage of my formerly unproductive driving time to dictate my session notes while they were still fresh in my mind,” added Cheek. “At the end of the day, Dragon would automatically transcribe my notes to my PC and all I’d have to do is edit them, cutting my paperwork time in half.”

Recognizing the significant challenges its staff faces on the job every day, Youth Villages is always looking for new ways to maintain job satisfaction and increase retention. That’s why, when the organization’s leaders saw the marked productivity gains that Cheek achieved with Dragon, they wanted to learn more about the technology and how it could help their dedicated team of counselors.

**Deciding on Dragon**

After talking to a Nuance representative and evaluating other options like phone-based transcription services, Youth Villages decided that Dragon was the best-fit solution in terms of both functionality and cost. Cheek was put in charge of the Dragon implementation and started developing a phased implementation plan for rolling out the solution to the organization’s family counselors.

Since Cheek had been using Dragon primarily for transcribed recorded dictation into the company’s Clinician’s Desktop case management application, he met one-on-one with a Nuance trainer to explore the software’s other features. He then put together some training materials, highlighting those Dragon features and capabilities that he felt would most benefit the family counseling staff.

In June 2007, Cheek worked with a selected group of 13 Youth Villages counselors from various offices to participate in the initial implementation phase. He conducted a one-day training session to introduce the software, teaching users how to dictate accurately, create voice shortcuts and custom commands, and leverage the Roaming user feature, which allowed them to access their user profiles from any PC logged into the network to ensure continual accuracy improvements.

During the first few months of the implementation, Cheek gathered time study data from participants to determine if

using Dragon to automatically transcribe voice recordings was significantly faster than typing case documentation from handwritten notes. “The initial time study data suggested that Dragon was indeed reducing paperwork time for our family counselors,” stated Cheeks. “As a result, our leadership decided to continue expanding use of the technology to other counselors.”

#### **Less stress, more productivity**

In December 2007, Youth Villages began Phase 2 of the Dragon implementation, adding 47 more users. During this 10-week pilot, Cheek collected time study data and survey responses to assess Dragon’s impact on both paperwork time and job satisfaction. “Youth Villages is a research-based organization that uses hard data to drive its strategic decisions and investments,” explains Cheek. “Through time studies and pre- and post-pilot surveys, we were able to obtain insight into whether Dragon was truly addressing the stressors that can lead to counselor burn-out and turnover.”

Time study results showed that using Dragon for automatic transcription of dictated notes cut counselors’ documentation completion time by an impressive 55% over typing. The survey results revealed that over the course of the 10-week pilot the percentage of counselors who said they were comfortable or very comfortable with the time of day at which they were completing their paperwork increased from 26% to 62%. The percentage of counselors who felt they had moderate to complete control over their documentation increased from 39% to 82%. The data also suggested that the counselors’ job satisfaction over the course of the pilot did not decrease as would typically be expected in such a high-stress job.

“Since we started using Dragon, we’re seeing increases in our retention numbers, consistency in our job satisfaction numbers, and a marked reduction in documentation completion times,” said Cheek. “The technology has been remarkably effective at accomplishing the objectives we set out to achieve with this implementation.”

#### **More than just dictation**

Youth Villages is now in Phase 3 of its implementation with more than 225 family counselors using Dragon for completing case documentation. The Dragon software is installed and

managed from a central network location at Youth Villages’ Memphis, Tennessee headquarters. Centralized administration makes it easy for the organization’s IT team to control settings, automatically synchronize updates, and perform system backups. It also allows IT to manage user profiles across the organization’s wide area network.

“I’m currently developing a universal list of customized vocabulary that incorporates terminology, acronyms and abbreviations commonly used by counselors across all of coverage areas,” said Cheek. “Once that list is approved, we’ll be able to automatically distribute the vocabulary to counselors in all our offices.”

As counselors grow more comfortable with dictation, they are starting to take greater advantage of Dragon’s other productivity-enhancing features. “For example, information in our various case notes is organized under numerous headings referred to as ‘tokens,’” added Cheek. “We’ve created and distributed custom commands, like ‘Insert Family therapy Note token 1’ that automatically insert the appropriate token. Now some of the counselors are creating their own custom commands to further speed and streamline paperwork.”

#### **Looking ahead**

Youth Villages will soon be rolling out Dragon to the remainder of its family counselor staff in 39 offices across 10 states and the District of Columbia. It will also be starting small Dragon pilots in its Foster Care and Crisis Response programs, where counselors face similar logistical challenges and job stressors.

“As Youth Villages’ clinical applications manager, my ultimate vision is for every community-based staff member and office-based counselor with intensive documentation requirements to have a voice recorder and access to Dragon both at home and at the office,” concluded Cheek. “If we keep seeing a direct relationship between our Dragon expenditures and savings from increased retention and reduced paperwork time, I fully expect that this vision will become a reality over time.”

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