Cass County offers a unique resource to clients applying for public assistance. Cass is a large, rural county, encompassing 2,018 square miles with a population density of approximately 14 people per square mile. The average per capita income is significantly lower than the state average. In 2006, to help needy families reduce travel costs and receive benefits faster, the county began offering face-to-face interviews by video-link from two of its family centers.

The idea came about when Joel Stokka of the Unity Group of Minnesota began working with “Covering Kids and Families”, a project of the Children’s Defense Fund of Minnesota. His task was to find and help families apply for Minnesota’s public health care programs and he knew that transportation and distance from the county office were barriers to people who wanted to apply. It was his idea to create “V-Link” to link outreach sites to the Cass County Human Services office in Walker. A grant was received from Veritas and equipment was donated by the Carlson Companies. The county began offering the service at its Pillager Family Center in April, 2006 and expanded to the Longville Family Center in December, 2006. Prior to that, Pillager residents travelled 120 miles round trip to the main county office, and Longville residents about 55 miles, often driving unreliable vehicles in inclement weather.

The V-Link system is used most often by households who want to apply or recertify for cash or food support programs. The county conducts about 10 application and 5 to 10 recertification interviews by V-Link each month. Clients mail their forms to the county office and are assigned a time to be at the family center for their interview. Family center staff assists by setting up the equipment in a private area of the center and showing how the equipment works. The Financial Worker and client can see and hear each other just as if they were face-to-face at the county office. The interviews are conducted exactly as they would be if the client came to the Walker office. After the interview, the client has the option of faxing verifications from the family center or mailing them from home. Clients who completed questionnaires all rated the experience as “good” or “excellent” and indicated a willingness to use the system again rather than drive to Walker.

This system saves time and money for the county as well as the client. Prior to having the V-Link system, Financial Workers travelled to Pillager once a month and stayed the entire day whether clients showed up for their interviews or not. Now, interviews are scheduled in Pillager three days per month and, if the client doesn’t show up for their scheduled interview, the Financial Worker is able to stay at their desk and continue working on other cases.