



KOKOMO PERSPECTIVE

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FSSA chief under fire

Flaws in privatization of welfare system in Howard and other counties causing problems for those in need

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Kokomo proved to be hostile ground for FSSA secretary Mitch Roob on July 31.

At the Select Joint Committee on Medicaid Oversight meeting at Indiana University Kokomo, Roob had several committee members aggressively challenging his answers, audience members applauding every time someone appeared to oppose Roob, and one after another people testifying against the new program he is running.

Part of the increased scrutiny is due to the contents of a letter from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which questioned the timeframe in which the Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) processes applications. Indiana has traditionally processed applications within 60 days, while the FNS requires a 30-day timeframe. Roob applied the 60-day standard to the new program, and the FNS wants that changed; however, the rollout of the FSSA's modernization efforts (the new program is not implemented in all Indiana counties yet) was stopped before Roob received the letter.

"We did not stop the rollout at the request of the federal government," said Roob. "We stopped the rollout because of the flood."

Earlier this summer, several Indiana counties were inundated with storms that caused flooding.

Roob said his office had indefinitely suspended the rollout 10 days prior to receiving the letter from the FNS, which requested that the FSSA examine its 60-day policy. Roob also downplayed the importance of the letter.

"We don't believe they have the authority to tell us to stop," said Roob.

That brought a quick response from committee chairman and Rep. Bill Crawford, D-Indianapolis, who pointed out that food stamps are funded by the federal government and that the FNS establishes standards for their distribution.

Roob said the letter was more about Indiana's longstanding 60-day policy and that the FNS wanted him to have two standards: one for the "modernized" part of the state and another for the parts that haven't been "modernized" yet. "We don't want two standards; we want a standard," said Roob.

Crawford responded with, "Rollout or non-rollout, we want to ensure people receive assistance in a timely fashion."

Gov. Mitch Daniels released a statement addressing the letter that the FNS sent to the FSSA and an Indianapolis Star article that brought the contents of the FNS to light. In that statement, Daniels had quotes from Kate Houston, deputy undersecretary of agriculture for the Food and Nutrition and Consumer Services.

Houston said, "Our June 23 letter states that FNS expects FSSA to realize substantial improvements in the area of application-processing before the state proceeds with any additional rollout of the modernization project. This was not an

order to stop rolling out - rather a statement that we trusted Indiana's commitment to successful implementation would lead the state to this same conclusion."

She later agreed with Roob about the FNS's authority over the FSSA's program.

"FNS does not have the authority to order the state to stop the project," said Houston. "As your statement notes, FNS has the authority to suspend/disallow administrative costs under 7CFR276.4. This authority is directed at violations of the Act and regulations. We did not invoke this authority in our June 23 communication."

Eventually the letter became a point of contention with Roob. He said he has received a number of positive letters from the FNS. "If you are going to criticize us for one letter, we expect you to read the other letters."

Despite Roob's issues with the letter from FNS, many people stood up to testify about problems with the system. Legislators also questioned specific functions of the modernization program.

When the success of the Voluntary Community Assistance Network (V-CAN), a program designed to allow Hoosiers to sign up for FSSA services at community aid organizations, was questioned, Roob began pointing fingers at the legislators. He said he had a budget, and he had to operate within that budget. He also said there wasn't enough money to keep all the county offices open and to do what he wanted to do with V-CAN.

"At some point in time you can't have your cake and eat it too," said Roob.

The crowd grew increasingly hostile after each of Roob's responses, and some whispered that he "just doesn't get it."

When he stepped up to testify in front of the committee, Rep. Ron Herrell, D-Kokomo, asked audience members to stop applauding when it appeared he wasn't going to be able to make it through his turn at the mic in a timely fashion. The applause was brought on by his one-liners.

"I keep hearing this word modernization; are we talking about privatization?" asked Herrell rhetorically.

This led to Herrell condemning private companies providing services such as welfare.

"Businesses are in business to make money," he said, "and my heart aches when I think about a business making these determinations for people who are the most vulnerable in the state and have the most needs."

Herrell introduced his brother-in-law, Steve Woodall, who was a former caseworker for FSSA and worked for the privatized program.

"Most of us sitting in the room don't know about all these big numbers flashing across the screen, but the thing I do know is a program is flawed when it doesn't provide good service," said Woodall.

He said during his time with the privatized version of FSSA there were issues with timeliness, managers ignoring clients, and equipment problems.

Woodall said the situation became so bad that he just walked off the job one day and never returned.

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