



EDITORIAL: System's flaws must be fixed

— If Indiana's new "modernized" welfare system was working, 150 people wouldn't have shown up this week in Anderson to discuss the foul-ups under Gov. Mitch Daniels' privatization plan.

In 2006, Daniels accepted a recommendation from an inter-agency team calling for the contracting of IBM to handle customer service for the Family Social Services Administration. IBM would take over intake services for Medicaid and food stamp eligibility. The plan would create call centers around the state; 1,000 jobs total. It would save \$500 million in administrative costs over 10 years.

It's clear though that IBM wasn't ready.

We applaud those who showed up for the panel Tuesday including state Sen. Tim Lanane, Rep. Scott Reske and a representative for Rep. Terri Austin's office, as well as senior citizen and mental health advocates.

Of the 150 people gathering Tuesday at the UAW headquarters, about 20 waited in line to tell welfare experts about their troubles with the new system.

Hour-long waits on the phone to call centers didn't seem unusual.

A township food pantry is buying extra food because local families have been removed from food stamps and told they must reapply. But if they do, they're bound to lose current benefits so they find they must appeal the decision first — all of which points to confusion.

One woman with Alzheimer's was denied Medicaid because her daughter helped "prompt" her memory when talking to an intake person over the phone.

One man's application didn't scan properly onto a call center's computer; it wasn't noticed until too late and he was denied benefits because of his untimely filing.

If this is just a new system working out the bugs, then it should have been worked out before the system initiated. Admittedly, the old FSSA system was plagued by inconsistencies and inefficiency. And, in specific cases, some disgruntled applicants might be at fault because they have failed to provide needed information or because they don't truly meet eligibility requirements.

But the pattern of complaints clearly suggests that the new system needs to be fixed.

First, the state must ensure that no one loses benefits or has them reduced. Gov. Daniels must intervene to fix this system, possibly by temporarily postponing life-threatening decisions about benefits.

Review the restrictive time limits for redetermining food stamps. Make sure that a one-call system is in place and that recipients aren't given additional numbers to call. Call center employees should not tell existing clients that they need to start from scratch in submitting documents. The list gets longer.

This makes us wonder about the future of Indiana's aging population.

We're concerned about current recipients. What happens when the Boomers need more services? Will this system be responsive or will the waits become longer and more frustrating? Instead of waiting to find out, we need a fix to the problem now.

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