



May 14, 2008

Hundreds attend meeting to complain about new welfare system

By **NICK WERNER**

nwerner@muncie.gannett.com

A Tuesday town hall meeting for area residents to vent frustration over the state's new welfare-delivery system drew a crowd of about 500.

What the crowd suggested about the new system's effectiveness became a subject of debate among those who support it and those who don't.

State Rep. Dennis Tyler, D-Muncie, was among those that don't support the privatized welfare delivery system administered through the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration.

"The turnout ... sends a pretty strong message that this is a problem in the system and it's not all your fault," Tyler told the crowd.

In an interview with The Star Press, FSSA Secretary Mitch Roob argued that the crowd at Tuesday's meeting did not reflect the majority of welfare recipients who they said were receiving benefits without complaint.

The state, Roob said, is providing services to more needy Hoosiers at a faster rate than before the privatization began last fall.

"We don't claim perfection," Roob said. "But we are sincerely interested on increasing the quality and quantity of services to Hoosiers."

Indiana began privatizing welfare delivery last fall in a pilot program that involved a dozen central and eastern Indiana counties, including Delaware County.

Whereas each county previously had its own welfare office, most operations in the 12-county region have been moved to a Marion call center operated by IBM Corp. and Affiliated Computer services.

The objective of the measure was to reduce welfare fraud and improve service to clients, according to Roob.

Since the transition, however, social service agencies have reported an increase in complaints from people who have lost their food stamps and Medicaid health care coverage.

Tyler and Roob were both on a panel at the Tuesday meeting that also included Center Township Trustee Kay Walker; State Sen. Sue Errington, D-Muncie; State Rep. Bill Davis, R-Portland, and State Rep. Jack Lutz, R-Anderson.

The panel listened as around 60 people -- some sobbing -- told stories of losing benefits and having problems navigating the new system.

People reported repeatedly that they can't get through to the call center because lines are busy or that FSSA has lost their application documents. Days were better, they said, when they had individual caseworkers.

Shannon Linthicum said the state bounced her off welfare after telling her their records showed her husband had three jobs.

"We told them he didn't have three jobs," Linthicum said.

Linthicum has a 10-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son with attention disorders and relies on the state for their health care and the family's food.

Melinda Jones said she can't get food stamps for her 10-month-old daughter who was born premature and is battling cancer.

"I have to beg and borrow from my family to get my daughter her food and it's ridiculous that we treat our children like this," she said.

Becky Norris of Salvation Army in Muncie said that organization's food pantry has been hit hard by people who otherwise would have bought food with food stamps.

"It's a mess," she said at the meeting.

In a mobile work station at the meeting, 69 clients met one on one with FSSA workers armed with laptop computers to help resolve their complaints.

The work station must have come as a relief to many clients who complained Tuesday that they missed face-to-face interaction with their old caseworkers.

Zach Main, director of FSSA's Division of Family Resources, however, said the work station and the clients it helped should not be interpreted as a concession by the state that the system was flawed.

"Keep in mind we've done 283,000 phone interviews since modernization began," Main said.
