

Stout: Why call centers make sense

Mary Katherine Stout, TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

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Next month, the state will begin using call centers to help Texans applying for government assistance programs, including Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program and food stamps. The call centers promise to save money in a ballooning health and human services budget, but as the roll out for the new system inches closer, the critics have grown louder.

A recent barrage of news articles have thoroughly represented the position of call-center critics, but they neglect to tell the whole story.

The current system is a technology dinosaur. Built in the '60s and '70s, it has tried to keep pace with ever-changing programs, requirements and caseloads, but it has only grown more outdated. In the 1970s, few people could have imagined a day when banking, paying bills and applying for credit cards could be done with such ease on the telephone or Internet. Yet that day is here.

The new eligibility system will catapult the state's welfare programs into the 21st century by employing technologies that Texans use daily. The call centers will streamline the application process and make it easier for clients. They also will help the system more effectively identify fraud and make it more efficient, resulting in savings for taxpayers.

The new system will use one application for many different programs, while giving applicants a number of ways to apply. Where field offices now are open during traditional business hours on weekdays only, the new system will allow clients to apply by phone during extended hours or on the Internet around the clock. These are increasingly standard conveniences that Texans expect, not the draconian inconveniences critics would have us believe.

In fact, the results of a little reported recipient survey show overwhelming support for the new system. According to the survey, 80 percent of recipients reported being "very" or "somewhat" likely to use the phone to apply for services; 36 percent said they are interested in applying online; 31 percent even reported having Internet access at home. In addition, 85 percent like the idea of fewer office visits, and 82 percent wanted to have the option to apply outside of normal business hours.

Sadly, the new system's numerous benefits have been neglected to showcase the more self-serving interests of its critics. Indeed, much of the criticism centers on plans to reduce the army of state workers who will no longer be needed as the new system comes online.

While cuts in the state workforce might make for a compelling story sold by unions, it is a distraction and a sad commentary on where some would place the priorities of Texas' social services system.

Interestingly, back in 2001, many of today's fiercest call-center critics were pushing to eliminate the requirement for face-to-face interviews in favor of a mail-in application. They argued that the high number of uninsured children was due to a cumbersome application process that unfairly burdened parents who had to miss work, travel to multiple appointments and repeat the procedure every few months. Conservatives back then supported face-to-face interviews as a means to guard against fraud and abuse.

Today's technology allows us to meet both objectives — making the process easier for applicants while ensuring the system's integrity.

The new system launches state social services into the future, rather than clinging to the past. With escalating Medicaid costs threatening the entire system's viability, Texas is obligated to actively pursue savings. This is the story that has been missing, and it's a story Texans need to hear.

Stout is the health care policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based nonprofit research institute.

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